MARCH

COMPLETE WESTERN BOOK Magazine

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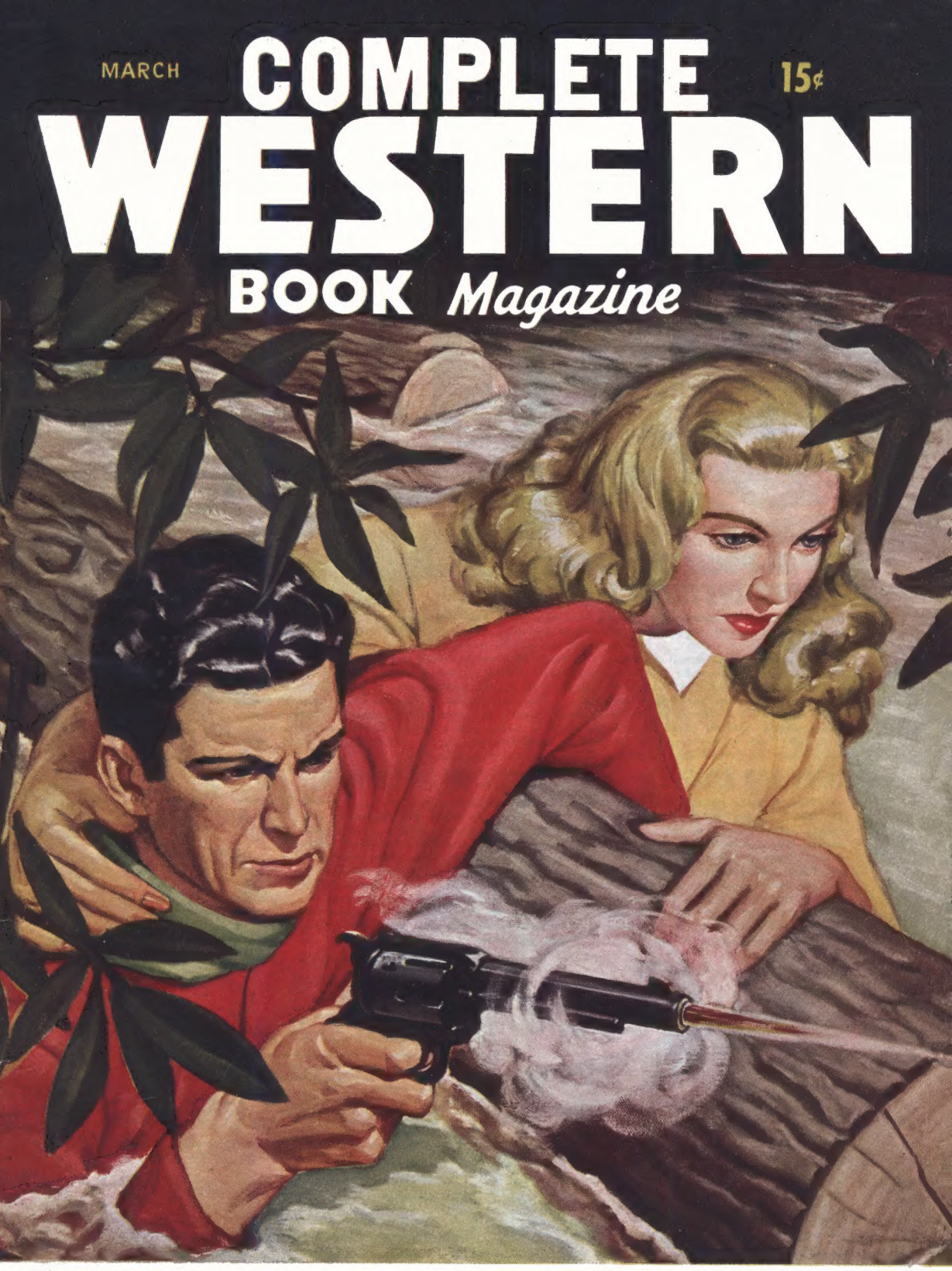

KID BROTHER TO A COLT KING

DRAMATIC TRAIL-TOWN NOVEL *by Frank C. Robertson*

★

SIX-GUN REBEL'S SUDDEN SALVATION

SMASH NOVELET *by Raymond W. Porter*

ALSO THRILLING SHORT STORIES

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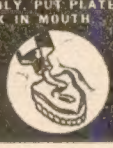

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COMPLETE WESTERN BOOK Magazine

Vol. 16. No. 2 — March, 1946

A RED CIRCLE MAGAZINE

ROBERT O. ERISMAN
Editor

★ ★ GREAT RANGE WAR NOVEL ★ ★

KID BROTHER TO A COLT KING
by Frank C. Robertson 8

Sure, Buckskin Bob knew his kid brother was wild and headstrong, but the button was no killer, he'd never bushwhack a man in cold blood, and neither the bandit-backed law of this range nor its notorious hot lead merchants would keep Buckskin from getting justice, if he had to bring it to Junction himself behind guns!

★ ★ SMASHING HOT LEAD NOVELETTE ★ ★

SIX-GUN REBEL'S SUDDEN SALVATION.....by Raymond W. Porter 58

Men hated and feared Sam Tooney, but this didn't make Sam king of Arroyo range. Until he was at last master of his own soul, it meant nothing that Sam Tooney could gun down any Colt-handler in the dust!

★ ★ THRILLING SHORT STORIES ★ ★

FOR LEASE—WATER RIGHTS IN HELL!.....by Ralph Berard 43

You saw Clay Masin's gun and you forgot the rest, the brute size of the man, the cruel grey eyes, the knife-thin mouth. You see, Clay Masin had subjugated all of Green Grass Valley with that six gun . . .

ONE-MAN ANTI-RUSTLERS' LEAGUE.....by Miles Overholt 82

It looked like the law was on the side of the killers all right, and Joe Angoff vowed he'd alter this if he had to give Yampa Valley a one-man Anti-Rustlers' League himself!

BUSHWHACK BOUNTY....by D. B. Newton 87

Mebbeso Danny's cowman-friend had known the brand of the bushwhacker who'd been cutting out his cattle, mebbeso that was all the kid needed to know to avenge this colddeck murder!

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MARCH, 1946—ISSUE

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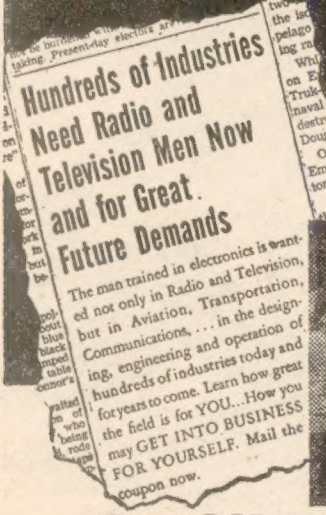

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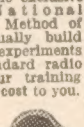

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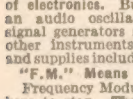

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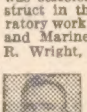

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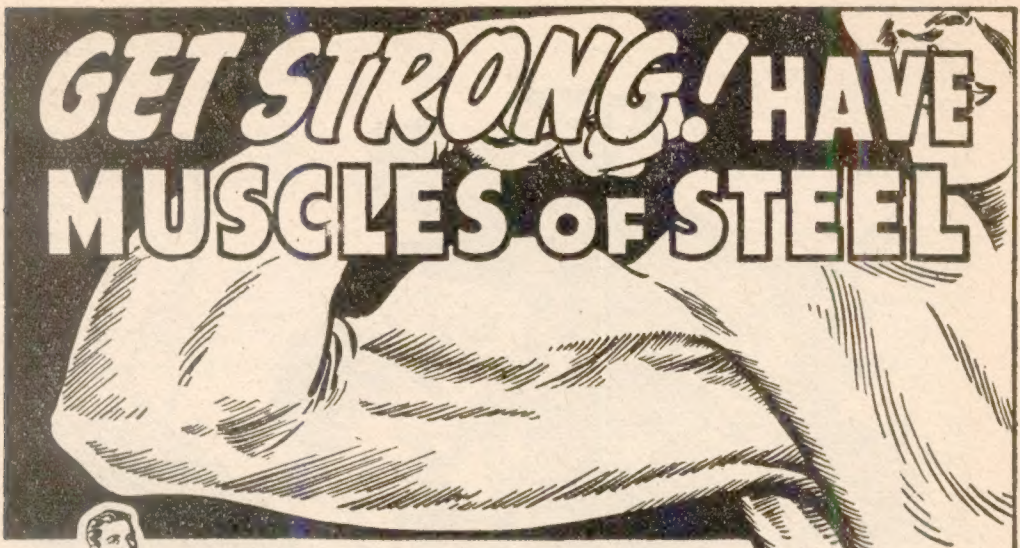

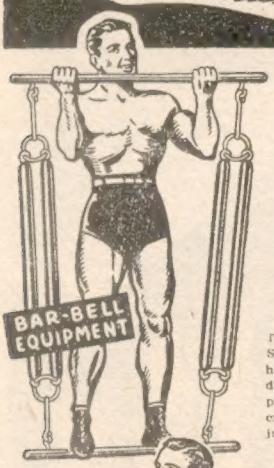

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KID BROTHER TO A

CHAPTER I

"BUCKSKIN" BOB HENDERSON felt the silence of the saloon as though it were a fog one might touch with the finger. It had to do with him, for every eye in the place was upon him as he entered the room. It was as if all the normal activities in this unsanctified place of amusement were in a state of suspended animation. It had to do with him, for only a moment before, just outside the door, he had heard the usual sounds of ribald gaiety.

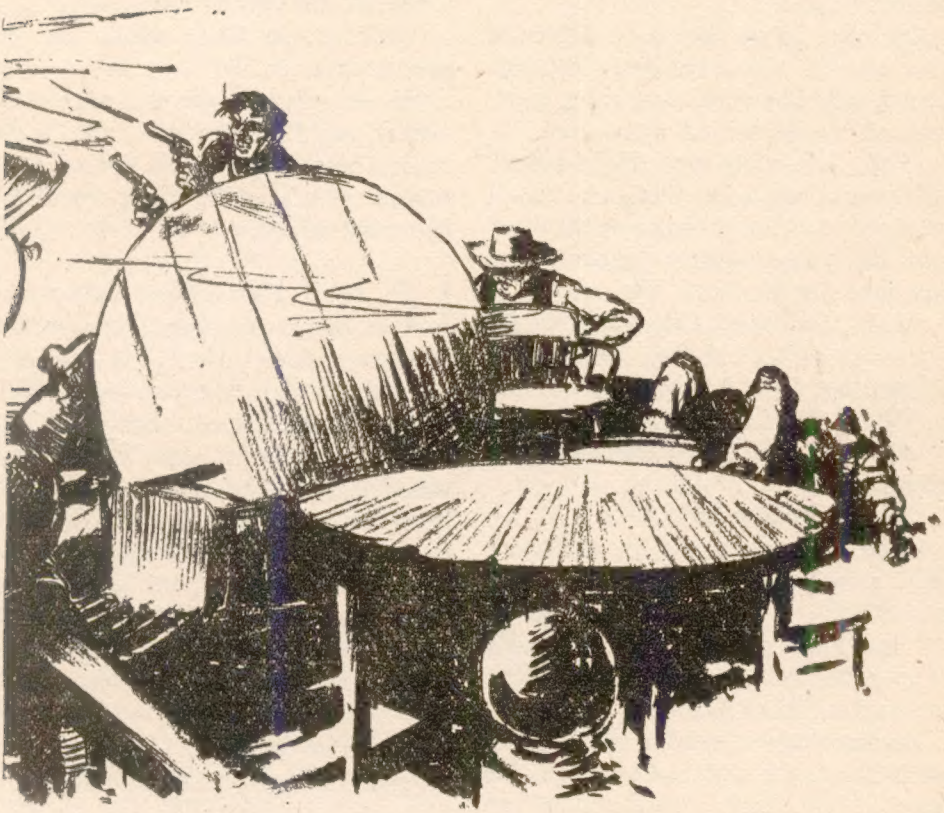
The tall man in the buckskin shirt, made especially for him by a Lemhi squaw who was an artist in her craft, stood still for half a minute before moving toward the bar. Everybody was looking at him, yet everybody avoided meeting his eye.

BIG SMASH NOVEL OF A RED-RAW RANGE WHERE KILLER

COLT KING

By FRANK C. ROBERTSON

Trouble was his kid brother's middle name, but Buckskin Bob knew the youngster was no killer, and Buckskin would see the button get justice if he had to call Junction's law court to order with his own two lightning-fast guns!



He had sized the situation, knew where every man stood. The odds were five to one, and Bob was not fool enough to wait for them to start shooting. And then both of his guns were blazing!

He strode on across the sawdust-covered floor to the bar. He wore regular cowboy boots, but somehow he planted his feet carefully and silently as if he were wearing moccasins. His fair skin was tanned and hardened by sun, snow, and wind. It would never occur to him that he might be thought eccentric. Yet he followed his own bent, lived his own life, and because of that some people thought he was queer. He liked the mountains, and he liked solitude, and

since there was no reason for him not to live the way he liked he went his own way, nor wronged or molested any man.

He was halfway across the room before normal activities were resumed. Men chalked their pool cues or played their cards, or sipped their drinks. But no one called out a cheerful, "Hello, Bob, where you been keepin' yourself this time?" Half of the men there he knew by name.

One man could always be depended upon to talk—the bartender. Any bartender. He knew this one, a big, good-natured Swede named Erickson.

"Vell, Bookskin Bob Henderson!" Erickson exclaimed as though he hadn't been aware of the presence of the other until Bob leaned against the bar. "Vere you bane dig dis time. Vot you haff?"

"Take a whiskey, Eric. And what's everybody so itchy about? Some report around that I got small-pox?"

"Oh, no," Erickson laughed uneasily. "You got yust as many friends as you effer have."

"Well, why shouldn't I?"

"You bane gone into de mountains quite a long time, eh, Bob? You yust git back?"

"Sure I just got back. Figgered I'd at least stay home over night," Henderson said a little irritably.

Erickson poured out the whiskey and set it before the man in buckskin. He watched him drink. "Haff anudder on de house," he invited, and filled the glass a second time.

"Listen, Bookskin," he said, "you put dis Yunction paper in your pocket, and ven you git to your voom you read it. Meppe den you know vy efferbody stop und look at you."

Henderson looked straight across at the bartender. "Has anything happened to Dare?" hs asked tensely.

Erickson handed a tightly folded paper across the bar. "Read dis, and meppe you find out," he said.

"Thanks, I will," Henderson replied. He put the paper in his pocket. "Will you have one on me?" he asked civilly.

"No, t'anks. I neffer drink on duty," Erickson refused.

Henderson turned and walked slowly out. The moment he was outside the door he stopped and listened. Excited voices rose from all parts of the saloon.

"Hell," he heard a man say, "he ain't heard a thing."

"What did yuh tell him, Eric?"

"He's plumb batty about that no good brother of his."

He stayed to hear no more. He walked rapidly down the street to the nearest hotel, and paid for a room. Dare was in trouble. The paper would tell him what it was.

HE HAD been almost father and mother to the twenty-one-year-old Dare ever since their mother had died when Dare was five years old. Bob had been twelve then. Sometimes the struggle had been hard, but he had raised the boy the best he could. He knew Dare was wild, but he didn't believe, and nobody could make him believe, that there was real harm in the boy. He accepted the key, found the room, turned on the light, and opened the pages of the local newspaper.

A headline seemed to reach out and slap him in the face.

JUNCTION SHOCKED BY BRUTAL MURDER
MARSHALL LEE VICTIM OF VICIOUS SLAYER
DARE HENDERSON AND DANCE HALL GIRL SOUGHT

Buckskin Bob's eyes licked up the words on the printed page. This wasn't the first time headstrong Dare had been in trouble, but he had never been mixed up with murder—or women.

Sly, prying little Tom Haines, the editor of the Junction Gazette, had made the most of his story.

"Junction's fearless peace officer tonight rests upon a slab in Morissey's undertaking establishment as a result

of having done his duty. Marshal George Lee was shot to death in the most cowardly and treacherous manner by tht young hoodlum, Dare Henderson, brother of the notorious "Buckskin Bob" Henderson, following the fearless marshal's refusal to allow the young man to parade the streets in company with a young woman of doubtful antecedents dressed in a manner displeasing to fine, virtuous women of Junction.

"People of this moral and law-abiding community were greatly shocked by the appearance yesterday on Main Street of a young woman riding a horse *astride*—not to mention a generous display of hosiery of far finer texture than is usually worn by the good ladies of this town.

"The young woman, whom it is *claimed* is the niece of the proprietress of a local rooming house, was properly reprimanded by Marshal Lee, and ordered to take herself off the street. Dare Henderson, her male companion, at that time indulged in profane and violent language, threatening to return and "get" the marshal after he had taken the girl home.

"Two hours later, after streets were dark, Marshal Lee was treacherously shot as he was leaving the Sunbeam Saloon, the shot coming from the darkened street. Henderson was presumed to have left town earlier, but two witnesses, well known and responsible citizens of the county, Mr. Ed McMain, and Mr. Clyde Sivert, saw Henderson running out of the alley between the Sunbeam and Olsen's Store, and fired at the assassin. An effort to question the young woman involved was foiled by her mysterious disappearance from town. It is believed that she has joined the fugitive in some of the numerous hideaways of Buckskin Bob Henderson, the murderer's elder brother.

"Marshal Lee was the victim of his own magnanimity, he having failed to disarm the young desperado upon his promise to leave town."

Buckskin Bob crushed the paper into a wad and hurled it into a corner of the room. A moment later he thought to look at the date. The paper was five days old. He didn't know whether Dare had been apprehended or not.

Nothing could have made him believe that his kid brother was guilty of murder. He wasn't the kind to shoot any man from ambush, even such a bigheaded intolerant fool as George Lee had been.

What he had to have was more facts; facts which shriveled, kow-towing, pusillanimous little Tom Haines had distorted or concealed in his account of the murder. He reckoned with the insidious attempt upon Haines' part to prejudice the countryside against him as well as Dare. He had never been "notorious", and he did not have "numerous hideouts."

THERE was one place where he could depend upon finding out the truth—the rooming house of Kate Brewster, whom Haines had touched by innuendo in his news story.

Buckskin Bob strode down the stairs and across the small hotel lobby. As in the saloon men watched him and said nothing.

Then, as he turned down the sidewalk, he came face to face with two men; one big, in expensive outdoor garb with the manner of conscious power and well being about him, the other a smallish character in an unkempt business suit who trotted at the big man's side looking up with the fawning adulation of a stray cur for a mastiff.

Tom Haines, the little editor of the Junction Gazette, gave a bleat of frightened surprise as he looked up and saw Buckskin Bob towering over him. He leaped shamelessly behind the big companion.

Buckskin Bob couldn't resist tempta-

tion. He reached out like a badger grabbing for a ground squirrel, and catching Haines by the neck yanked him half way across the sidewalk.

"You better let me go," the slimy little editor squeaked.

"Had I? Why, I'd ought to wring your neck you dirty little pip-squeak. Since when have I been 'the notorious Buckskin Bob Henderson?' Since when have I had a lot of hideouts? And what do you mean printin' lies about my brother?" Bob demanded.

"They're not lies," Haines squeaked. "Dare Henderson is a murderer. He shot Marshal Lee less than fifty feet from right here."

In his rage Buckskin Bob drew back to completely spoil the little man's evil features, but his arm was caught in a grip of steel as Haines' big companion stepped forward.

Lucius Judd, Superintendent of the Consolidated Mines Company, was a red-faced man with a round body that looked fat, but wasn't. In two years he had established himself as the dominant figure around Junction. It wasn't strange that a natural-born sycophant like Haines should honey around Judd, but hard to understand why Judd should bother about Haines.

"I wouldn't hit the little man if I was you," Judd said coldly.

Henderson dropped his arm. "You're right," he said evenly. "He's not worth dirtying my hands on. But he's got this coming."

He made a sudden move, turned Haines around and drop-kicked the editor clear off the sidewalk.

Haines squalled like a cat as he landed on his face, but Buckskin Bob didn't even look at him. He faced Lucius Judd with cold challenge in his gray eyes.

"Like your brother I suppose you'd shoot a man in the back," Judd said angrily.

Buckskin Bob's body moved like a well-oiled machine. He took a step forward, feinted at the big mining man's head with his right, hooked his left into the pit of the man's stomach, and as Judd bent over with a grunt lifted him high with a well-placed right under the chin. Judd struck the street more awkwardly than Haines had done.

Buckskin Bob looked at the two men a moment, rubbed the knuckles of his right fist, and walked rapidly toward Kate Brewster's boarding house.

CHAPTER 2

KATE BREWSTER, a big, good-looking woman with red hair, wearing a flamboyant pink silk kimona, met Buckskin Bob at the door.

"Bob Henderson!" she exclaimed in a loud, but not unpleasant voice. "I knew you'd be along any minute. Come right in. Come upstairs to my room where we can talk without these boarders of mine stretchin' their ears."

Bob followed obediently. They were friends of many years standing, these two. Better than almost anyone else Bob knew the worth of this female diamond in the rough. Her room was as might have been suspected, cluttered with all sorts of gee-gaws and finery which Kate Brewster, alas, seldom got a chance to show off.

"Where's Dare?" he asked the moment the door closed.

"I sure wish I knew," Kate said. "Set down and I'll tell you what little I know. Here, have a drink."

Bob seated himself on a love seat covered with red leather, and took the shot of whiskey the woman offered.

"When did you hear?" she asked.

"I haven't heard anything," he replied. "When I got in tonight everybody shut up. Then Erickson handed me a copy of the Gazette. I went to the hotel and read what that lyin' Tom Haines had wrote. That's all I know."

"Then you don't know anything, and I don't know much more."

"Dare hasn't been taken, has he?"

KATE looked straight across at him, her blue eyes warm with sympathy. "No, they haven't taken him, Bob, but he may be dead."

"Dead!" he leaped to his feet. "Not—not Dare. He couldn't be."

"I hope not, and I don't believe he is, but when I saw him last he had been wounded. I only caught a glimpse, but it looked bad."

"When was this?" Bob asked dully.

"About five minutes after George Lee was shot. The mob was after him. His horse was out back, and he ran through my yard. 'I been framed, Kate,' he said, 'an' I'm shot. I gotta git away.' He'd have fell, I reckon, if me and Bernice hadn't helped him on his horse. And he couldn't have rode alone either if Bernice hadn't climbed on behind him. That was five days ago, and neither of them have been seen since."

"Who is Bernice?"

"That's a long story in itself," Kate said. "Look: I'll call Daisy and have her fix you some supper, and I'll tell you all I know."

"If Dare's been hurt I've got to find him," he said, and Kate looked away so as not to see the grief in his face.

"An hour won't make any difference," she said, "and you need to eat." She moved to the head of the stairs and called out, "Daisy!" in a stentorian voice. A minute or so later a frowsy-headed blonde with buck teeth answered the summons.

"Fix Buckskin Bob a two inch steak, some French fries, and a pot of coffee," Kate yelled.

Daisy stuck her head into the room with an ingratiating grin, "Hi, Buckskin Bob," she giggled.

"Hello, Daisy," Bob returned. "Don't go to any extra trouble for me."

"Gee, it'll be a pleasure," Daisy said, sticking her grinning face into the room for a moment, before she fled giggling down the stairs.

"Simpleton," Kate commented.

"This Bernice," Bob began. "The paper said she was your 'alleged' niece. And you say she rode away with Dare five days ago and hasn't been seen yet. Who is she?"

"Bob, do you remember the Lost Soldier mine?" Kate asked.

Bob gave a start. "Sure I do. But what's a hole in the ground filled with water got to do with George Lee being murdered and Dare framed for it, and a strange girl hidin' him out?" he asked wonderingly.

"I may be wrong, but I think it has everything," Kate stated. "The man back of this whole thing is Lucius Judd, and the one he's gunning for isn't Dare or Bernice but Buckskin Bob Henderson and old lady Brewster. And what he wants is the Lost Soldier mine."

"I'm dizzy as a pup," Bob confessed. "I remember the Lost Soldier mine because I gave you a half interest in it, and I blush every time I think of it. You saved my life that winter I had pneumonia and you wouldn't take any money for nursing me. The only reason you accepted the Lost Soldier was because we both knew it wasn't worth a damn."

"That's not true," Kate denied. "We both knew that that poor consumptive engineer, Joel Sibley, who developed it, found rich ore and plenty of it."

"And couldn't take it out because the shaft filled up with water faster than it could possibly be pumped out. The only reason I bought it from him at all was because he was sick and broke, and I only gave him five hundred dollars for it as it was, although I told him if we ever did find a way to get the water out I'd give him back a half interest. That's the only reason I didn't give you all of it."

"And I only took it to please you,"

Kate smiled. "I didn't want anything for taking care of you when you were sick. It was a pleasure. It's still a pleasure to do things for you, Bob, when you'll let me."

BOB walked uneasily to the window. He had wondered sometimes if Kate Brewster was in love with him, although she was ten years his senior. At least they liked each other.

"You mean to say Judd wants the Lost Soldier?" he asked.

"He offered a thousand dollars for my interest. I smelled a mouse and because I hate his guts anyway I told him it was worth just as much to us as it was to him no matter how much he offered."

"Go on."

"He got red in the face and said he'd force us to sell. In the months that you've been away he's done his darndest. He's tried to have my license revoked, and tried to get this building condemned, and anything else he could think of. Because George Lee and the rest of the town officers are his tools they've made it pretty tough."

Buckskin Bob swore.

"He wouldn't have done all that if he hadn't wanted the mine pretty bad, I figured," Kate went on. "Then Bernice Sibley showed up here and I knew it?"

"Bernice Sibley!" Bob exclaimed. "You mean this girl with Dare is the daughter of the Joel Sibley that sold me the Lost Soldier mine?"

"That's right. You see, Sibley got better after he left here and he got a job working for the outfit Judd was superintendent of. He knew all about this country, and what he told Judd was what brought Judd in here to organize the Consolidated Mines. You know how he has made all the old prospectors sell their claims to him here. But that wasn't all the story. Lucius Judd pulled the dirtiest kind of a trick on Sibley, and sent him to prison. He died there."

"That would be like Judd," Henderson commented. "Is that what brought the girl here?"

"Yes. You see Judd had the cast-iron nerve to write to her about buying the Lost Soldier. He didn't know at the time that Sibley had sold it to you. It struck Bernice that it might be worth something so she came out here, not only to see about that, but with a wild idea in her foolish head that she might be able to get even with Judd for what he had done to her father."

"Don't blame her."

"Neither do I," Kate concurred, "and her scheme wasn't bad—except for one thing."

"What was that?"

"She came under another name, planning to get a job in Judd's office. Unfortunately, Judd has a memory like an elephant. He had only seen her once, when he testified against her father, but he made every hotel in town refuse to let her stay."

"And you," Bob nodded, "took her in."

"Right. And right away Judd spread gossip that I was running a bad place and Bernice, who is as sweet a girl as ever lived, wasn't what she ought to be."

"I'm glad I did," Bob murmured, lowering his eyes.

Kate showed her surprise. "You're glad you did what?" she blurted.

"Socked him. My knuckles still ache."

Kate Brewster got up, came over to where Bob stood and kissed him solemnly on the cheek.

"Now where does Dare come in?" he growled.

"This is going to be hard to believe," Kate said, "but—"

She was interrupted by a piercing scream that issued from Daisy's throat in the kitchen.

CHAPTER 3

BUCKSKIN BOB beat Kate to the head of the stairs and ran down. Several of Kate's male roomers stuck their heads out to ask who was being murdered. Without waiting for Kate, Bob threw open the kitchen door. He saw Daisy standing open-mouthed by the kitchen sink, pointing a dramatic finger at perhaps the most bedraggled young woman Buckskin Bob had ever seen.

The girl had collapsed on a chair. Her dress was torn and the front stiff and sticky from what appeared to be dried blood. There were holes in her stockings, and her shoes were scuffed and muddy. Dark, unkempt hair hung down over her shoulders and around her face. A pair of big, glowing brown eyes looked fearfully up at Bob from a dirt-smudged face.

He knew instinctively that this was Bernice Sibley. The other boarders were pounding down the stairway behind him. He turned swiftly to slam the door in the face of the nearest man.

A moment later Kate rattled the knob and called, "Let me in! What's happened?"

Bob opened the door just wide enough that no one else could see inside. "Not a cussed thing," he drawled, "except that Daisy here saw a mouse."

He opened the door wide enough for Kate to enter, but closed it before anyone else could follow, or before Daisy could do more than open her mouth to voice a denial. Even Kate started to exclaim, and Bob dug her viciously in the ribs with his elbow.

"Shut up, and stop pointing with that finger, Daisy," Kate ordered sharply. Daisy's hand dropped, and her mouth closed simultaneously.

The reaction of the Sibley girl was unexpected by Bob. "Oh, Miss Brewster!" she sobbed, and holding out her hands she rushed into Kate's embrace.

Buckskin Bob got a good look at those outstretched hands, and the sight of them made him want to cry out of sheer sympathy. Five days before they must have been soft, white and shapely. Now the nails were broken off down to the quick, there were cuts and scratches all over them—and the whole inside of them were covered with blisters!

"Darling, where have you been?" Kate cooed, patting the girl's back reassuringly. "You can talk—this is Bob Henderson."

"It—it's be—been terrible," the girl sobbed; then, with a great effort, choked back her sobs and raised her head. She drew the back of a grimy hand across her face. "I shouldn't have gone to pieces," she apologized. "I'll be all right now."

"Sure ye will," Kate soothed.

Buckskin Bob at last broke in with the question he had been dying to ask. "Where is Dare? Is he—all right?"

"And answer softly," Kate put in quickly. "There may be eavesdroppers about. Daisy, pull down that blind."

They all waited while the hired girl drew down the blind. By that time Miss Sibley had hold of herself. "He's alive," she whispered, "but he needs medicine and attention badly. He didn't want me to come, but I had to. I couldn't let him lie there and die."

There were questions which Bob had to ask, but he hesitated to ask them in in the presence of the loose-tongued, none too bright Daisy.

Kate read his thought. "Go ahead," she said, "if Daisy opens her mouth about any of this I'll choke her."

"I won't say a word," Daisy giggled.

"Where is Dare?" Bob asked.

"I—I—don't know how to tell you," Bernice answered. "I can find my way back, but—"

"What kind of a place is he in?"

"It must be a good one, for Lucius Judd's men have been turnin' the whole

country upside down lookin' for 'em," Kate said.

"It's in a canyon," the girl vouchsafed, "where a lot of logs and brush have fallen across a wash. We were able to crawl under there, and there is a small stream of water runs under the logs, too."

Kate looked expectantly at Buckskin Bob. "Know the place?" she asked.

"I think I do," he answered slowly. "It's in Slide Canyon. But what became of Dare's horse?"

"We turned it loose and hid the saddle."

"I forgot to tell you they found the horse the next morning at your homestead," Kate said.

"But, good lord, what did you have to eat? How did you make out at all if Dare is badly hurt?" Bob queried.

THE girl extended her bruised and mutilated hands in a swift, half apologetic gesture. "After the first night Dare told me about a potato patch near the mouth of the canyon. There were turnips and carrots there, too, but I couldn't find any tools, so, I had to dig them with my hands, and the ground was frozen."

"You poor child," commiserated Kate. "Why didn't you come home?"

"I couldn't leave Dare wounded the way he was, and he said if he came in they would hang him. He claimed he was doing all right, said in a few days he'd be strong enough to get out of the country, but I finally saw that he wouldn't so I came back for help."

For sheer, unselfish courage this girl's actions beat anything Bob had ever seen, and he felt humbled before her. He said, "Miss Sibley, for what you've done for my brother you can ask anything in the world from me, and if it's in my power I'll do it."

"I just knew that Dare wasn't guilty, and I couldn't let that mob hang him for something he didn't do," Bernice said simply.

"She's that kind of a girl, Bob," Kate contributed.

"I still wonder what we can do about Dare," Bernice said.

"That'll be up to me now," Bob said. "You mustn't get into trouble on account of my brother."

"I think I'm already into it."

"Dare's wanted for murder, and she helped him escape. Don't ever think Lucius Judd will let her off if he can help it," Kate stated.

"Then I'll see what about changing some of his fine ideas," Buckskin Bob said savagely.

"And land your own neck in a noose. Remember this is a murder charge, and so far we ain't got a thing to prove Dare didn't kill George Lee."

"I'm sorry," Bob apologized. "I'm upset. Me and Dare can fight our own battles; I just don't want you women mixed up in it. If Dare decides to fight it out I'll be out there fighting alongside him."

"I know that, you fool," Kate worried. "You gettin' yourself hanged can't help Dare a particle. I want you to persuade him to surrender. Then we'll make some sort of a deal with Judd to get him and Bernice off easy."

Bob looked at the woman with surprise. Never figgered you to be a quitter, Kate," he said. "I agree about Miss Sibley here. We've got to keep her out of trouble. But Dare is another matter. I've got to know he's got a chance before I ask him to come in. I want to know his side of the story."

"I can tell you," Bernice said, although she drooped with weariness. "It was all my fault."

"It was not," Kate contradicted.

"I was foolish enough to come here thinking I could fight a man like Lucius Judd," the girl went on, ignoring Kate. "Then, because I was lonesome, and Dare was nice to me, I was silly enough

to ride his horse down the street."

"Well, Holy Joe, what's wrong with that?" Bob blurted.

"You don't understand," Kate said with gentle sarcasm, while Bernice blushed. "She actually got on the horse astride, and she must have shown her stockings almost to the knee."

"To the—what the devil is this? Since when is it a crime for a girl to ride a-straddle in the streets of Junction?" For a moment Bob was inclined to think somebody was ribbing him.

"It became a crime when Marshal George Lee said it was, and ordered her off the street," Kate said with bitter irony.

"What?"

"He told her to get back to the kind of house where she belonged—meaning mine—and said the sweet, *decent* ladies of the town would not stand for having such a person as Bernice here make a public spectacle of herself."

Buckskin Bob's wrath was so monumental that he choked and turned red in the face. "Why—why—" he got out presently, "that dirty, insulting dog. Was—was Dare there?"

"Not only that, he was on the horse behind her."

In a low, angry voice Bob said, "I only wonder that he didn't kill Lee then and there."

"He threatened to—that's the terrible part of it," Bernice whispered. "He drew his gun on the officer, and told him quite a few things, I guess."

"And guessin' it is with you," Kate jeered good naturedly, "you were off that horse and runnin' home so fast you showed a lot more silk stocking than you did on the horse."

"Then what?" Bob prompted grimly.

KATE took up the story. "It seems Lee stood on the sidewalk and howled that he would get out a warrant against them both—Dare for resisting an officer, and Bernice for—for—and anyway Dare yells back, 'When you come after me, Lee, you better come with a gun in your hand'."

"That happened just about dusk. Dare came on over here and tied his horse in the back. I tried to get him to go home, but he said he wouldn't run. Meant to give Lee a chance to carry out his threat. Then, a couple of hours later, he left here to get some medicine at the drug store for Hardrock Lyon, which he had forgotten. And five minutes after that we heard shots. We rushed to the door and heard somebody yellin' that Dare had shot Marshal Lee. Then Dare himself came runnin' in all bent over and told us he had been hit, and you know the rest, except that he told us as we were helpin' him on his horse that he hadn't fired a shot at anybody."

When Kate paused for breath Bernice began, "The next day he told me about it. As he was on his way to the drug store somebody yelled, 'Here comes Henderson, Marshal.'

"The next thing he knew, he said, some men fired past him and he saw the marshal fall. Then, as he turned, another man shot him. Dare said he didn't fall. He drew his gun and fired at those two men, but he was hurt too badly to take aim and he missed them."

"Did he say who the men were?" Bob queried eagerly.

"I asked him that," the girl replied, "and he shook his head. But I had the feeling that he did know who they were."

"I'll bet he knows," Bob said. "Anyway, I do. According to Tom Haines' yaller sheet it was Ed McMain and Clyde Sivert who claimed to have seen and shot at him. I'll take the job of dealing with them off his hands."

"You realize, don't you Bob," Kate said earnestly, "that the evidence against Dare is unbeatable? If you mix in, they'll get you just as surely as they will get him."

Bernice was looking at him half pleadingly, half hopefully. Plainly neither woman wanted him to get hurt, but it was more than a matter of sentiment.

"I know exactly what I'm up against," he told them gently.

CHAPTER 4

BUCKSKIN BOB knew that he would be watched. He had to get out of town unseen if he was to do Dare any good. It wouldn't be easy. His horse was tied in plain view in front of Kate Brewster's place, and beyond a doubt somebody would be watching it.

It wasn't himself, nor even Dare, that worried him most just now, however, but Bernice Sibley. The girl believed she had slipped in without being seen, after a long hard walk of ten mountain miles, but if her presence were to become known Lucius Judd was not above having her thrown into jail. And, after what she had done for Dare, Bob felt that he would surely kill any man who dared to lay a hand on her.

How was she going to be kept concealed in a place as public as a boarding house? Kate asserted that she would attend to that, by smuggling the girl into her own room. But even so, and without the hazard of Daisy sometime saying the wrong thing, it would be dangerous.

Bob was first to leave the kitchen. He took Bernice's sore hands tenderly. "I can't tell you how much I appreciate what you've done for my brother," he said. "Some day I hope I'll be able to pay you back. And if there is anything of any value in the Lost Soldier mine then my interest in it is your's."

"Oh, no," Bernice protested, "I couldn't take that. Kate has told me all about it. My father sold you the mine."

"But I told him if it was ever worth anything I'd give him half of it back, and I meant it," Bob said.

Kate, who owned the other half, listened to them with warm interest but said nothing.

"Take care of her, Kate," Buckskin Bob adjured, "and I'll see you soon."

He walked out to his horse, and the animal, which had come a long way that day, nickered. There were only four dim street lights in all Junction. He remembered how Dare had been tricked and trapped and it occurred to him that from this time on he must be constantly alert even in his own home town.

Kate's place stood off by itself and was surrounded by a picket fence, the front yard extending perhaps three rods to the street. After his horse nickered he saw that its head was turned another way. Without stopping he allowed his gaze to wander in that direction, and he saw a shadow that looked thicker than the shadow of a post ought to be.

Then, even as he became suspicious of that object a figure detached itself from a building across the street and walked toward him. Every nerve in his body tensed. It seemed foredoomed that both Henderson boys were to become outlaws, and if this was the time for the elder one to start then he was ready.

A single jerk untied his bridle reins, and he swung the horse about so that it stood between him and the picket fence.

"Just a second, Henderson," a cold voice ordered. The man crossing the street was now ten feet distant; a star glittered on his breast, and his hand rested upon his gun. There was a belligerent hunch to his shoulders. He was a stranger to Buckskin Bob.

"What's your trouble, friend?" Bob inquired mildly.

"I want to talk with you. Come over to the town hall with me, but first I want that smoke-pole you're carrying," the man said arrogantly.

"I'm under arrest for what?" Bob demanded, his mild voice changing to ice.

"I didn't say you was under arrest. I just want to talk to you. Come on now, hand over that gun, an' no back talk," the officer said bullyingly.

"Which one of you have orders to shoot me—you or the fellow over there behind the picket fence?" Bob asked.

The fellow gave a start that seemed to be genuine. He started to look in that direction, decided it might be a trick and turned back.

"Don't give me no trouble," he growled. I'm pretty tough."

"And pretty dumb if you think I'll turn over my gun," Bob sneered. "There's no charge against me, you've got no warrant, so don't be a damned fool and get yourself killed."

BOB didn't know that the special deputy imported by Lucius Judd to serve as guard for his Consolidated Mines had been a professional tough in various cities of the country, and looked with utmost scorn upon everyone in the range country. Bull Davis counted himself capable of intimidating anyone he chose by roaring at them.

"Why, you bum," the fellow roared, "I'll—" He had been warned that Buckskin Bob Henderson was a dangerous man and a dead shot. True to his bullying instinct Bull Davis lunged ahead as he bellowed aiming to knock Bob off balance with the heel of his left hand to the chin, while he drew his own weapon.

Bob retained his hold on his horse's shortened rein; not forgetting for a moment the man he believed to be lurking along the fence. He turned his horse's head with a quick jerk of the reins, and gouged it in the neck with his thumb. Ribbon was not so tired that he couldn't react when he caught sight of the lunging Bull Davis. He lashed out instantly catching the special deputy in the breast with both hind feet.

Bull Davis went down like he had been smashed with an axe. At the same instant there came the sound of a shot, and an orange streak of lightning split the darkness in front of the horse's nose. With unerring instinct Bob marked the spot from which that streak had started, and fired across the seat of his saddle. An agonized yell sounded as the report of his gun died.

The door of the boarding house burst open and Kate Brewster came running out, followed by her pack of half-dressed boarders.

"Bob! Bob, are you hurt?" Kate cried out loudly.

"No, but there's a skunk just inside your fence who is," Bob said. "And another one out here."

"Oh, my God," Kate cried out in anguish, "they'll be after you now."

"Reckon they will," Bob said grimly. "I don't know who either of 'em were, but it looked like this fellow was planted to kill that officer out there when he tried to arrest me. Probably the same dodge they tried to work on Dare."

Kate had reached the man by the fence. He had fallen on his face, and he twitched convulsively, then stopped.

"That man is dead," one of the boarders said, and turned the fellow over. "It's Clyde Sivert!"

"One of the two who claimed they saw Dare shoot George Lee," Kate said hastily to Bob. "Ed McMain was the other. Maybe that's him in the street."

If there were two worthless characters in the world Sivert and McMain were those two. Tinhorn gamblers, crooks, and general troublemakers their atonement was long overdue. Bob could feel no remorse at having killed Sivert. But already people were arriving from Main Street. Bob realized that if he was going to get out of town and join Dare he would have to go now. If

he stayed they would detain him in town over the Sivert matter so long that at best Dare would die or have to come in and surrender—and that meant hanging.

"Well, good-bye, Kate," he said hurriedly,"I'll be seeing you." He had not crossed the street, and he still held his horse's reins. He swung up as he heard a man shout, "Look! Bull Davis has been killed!"

"That's Buckskin Bob Henderson," another man yelled. "He musta done it."

Bob reined his horse, but as he did so he heard another voice that sent dread right down to the toes of his boots.

"Hey, Kate, Kate!" one of the boarders sang out, "I just saw that niece of your's runnin' into the house!"

"You darned fool!" Kate screamed back at the fellow, but both she and Bob knew that the damage had been done. Undoubtedly the fear that Bob had been killed had caused the girl to come into the yard with the others. When she had tried to get back she had been seen by the loose-tongued boarder. Now Lucius Judd's hounds of hell would be after her.

There was nothing Buckskin Bob could do. He had to get out of town. He gave his tired horse the spurs, and as the animal leaped into a gallop the new marshal of the town, Bill Head, yelled at him to halt.

Buckskin Bob fired two shots above the marshal's head and kept on going.

CHAPTER 5

ONCE out of gunshot distance Buckskin Bob stopped to listen. There was no sound of pursuit. He was headed toward his ranch, and he kept going. Dare had been living there, and there should be a few medicinal supplies; antiseptics and bandages on hand. There was no chance now to get anything from the drug store.

Bob had been in the mountains almost six months, for he preferred prospecting, hunting and occasionally serving as guide to some party of Eastern pilgrims to the hum-drum business of running a ranch. He often told himself it was wrong, and tried hard to settle down to handling the small cow outfit, but always the call of the mountains overcame him, and then there was Dare, who liked the ranch and seemed eager to take over.

He had been afraid that Dare might get into trouble, but had never envisioned anything like this. He couldn't see yet, however, how Dare had been to blame, or how he could have avoided it. But a great hate against the men responsible rose within him. Undoubtedly the man he had shot had been implicated in the conspiracy, and Bob was glad.

Then he thought of Bernice Sibley's hands and his savage mood passed. His thoughts were almost gentle—until he remembered Lucius Judd.

He flung the reins to the ground and ran into the cabin. He was struck at once by Dare's disorderly housekeeping; then he recalled that the officers had probably turned everything upside down. He rushed to the cupboard where they always kept a few simple disinfectants—and there was nothing there. He swore bitterly. They might have left at least a bottle of carbolic acid, he thought.

He did find a few clean dish towels, freshly laundered by the neighboring women who did Dare's washing. He made a roll of them and went out to his horse.

He rode away through the pasture where his horse would leave no tracks, and had just reached the mouth of a coulee outside the fence, but still in sight of the house when he saw horsemen loom up in the moonlight. He dis-

mounted and waited.

The posse was searching the house and they took their time about it. When they finally departed Bob knew that at least two men had been left behind. Smiling grimly he mounted and headed for Slide Canyon, but in a roundabout way so that he came upon it from above, and made his way down to the jam where he believed Dare to be hiding, on foot.

The night was far gone, with only a few stars twinkling dimly over the deep, narrow canyon. A long ago landslide had formed a lake half a mile up, and the overflow swept down in a raging cataract of white water.

Once the dam above had partly broken and the resulting flood had cut a wash from twenty to fifty feet deep, tearing out great trees and boulders and hurling them down the mountainside. The place Bob was looking for was where a number of trees had lodged in and across the wash. Rocks and brush had covered it over making a perfect cave underneath with a narrow opening where the water poured through. It was impossible to enter without wading.

Bob listened, but the only sound was the gurgling water. He removed his boots and entered the dark cavern. After three steps he was able to find dry ground, and to straighten up. The entrance had been only about four feet high.

"What's that?" a voice spat out in sibulant, suspicious tones.

"Dare! It's Bob!"

He heard a long, trembling sigh, then Dare said contentedly, "That's good. How'd you find me, you old rock-walloper?"

"The Sibley girl." Bob knelt beside the blankets on which his brother lay. "How are you, kid?"

"Shot to hell. Tell me: is Bernice all right?"

"Y—yes, sure. She's at Kate's. Nobody knows she's there."

"They'd make it tough for her if they could. Gosh, Bob, if you knew what that kid had done for me—Say, I don't want you gittin' into trouble on my account."

"Never mind about that. How bad are you hurt?"

"Oh, I'll pull through. I've lived this long, so I'll make it if they don't hang me. But I want news. What's happened? Did George Lee die?"

"He did. Do you know who killed him?"

"Uh-huh. An' when I git out—"

"Who was it?"

"I'll take care of 'em. You don't have to kill my snakes for me."

"I've already got one of 'em. It was Sivert and McMain, wasn't it?"

"Yeh. You mean you—you—killed —"

"I shot Sivert tonight. Looks like they tried to pull the same thing on me they did on you."

"I should have killed George Lee, the way he talked to Bernice, but I didn't do it. McMain shot him, and Sivert yelled that he seen me do it. Next thing I knew Sivert got me in the breast, an' I just did make it back to Kate's. I couldn't have stayed on my horse if Bernice hadn't been on behind me. She's wonderful, Bob."

"I know. Now I've got to have a look at that wound of your's."

HE MADE a torch which he stuck into a crack and by its flickering light examined his brother's wound. Bernice had done the best she could to bandage it, but when exposed the wound looked terribly red and inflamed. Dare's dark face looked almost bloodless underneath the five day's growth of whiskers.

"Well, kid, I know that bullet wounds sometimes cure themselves, but you've got to have a doctor. Do you know what it means?"

"If you killed Sivert it means they'll hang us both."

"I killed Sivert, but you didn't kill Lee. That's the difference. You've got to go in, Dare, but I don't think you need worry about hanging. I know what's back of this thing now, and before I'm through I'll put the blame where it belongs." He had never been more uncertain about a thing in his life. He knew that he might indeed be sending Dare back to be hanged for a crime which he hadn't committed, yet his brother's blood would be on his hands if he left him here to die like a wounded squirrel in its den.

Doc Keller, the one physician in Junction, was a good friend of the Henderson boys, but he couldn't be expected to jeopardize his professional standing by keeping silent after he knew of Dare's whereabouts.

"I won't go," Dare declared. "With Judd after us neither one has got a chance. I'll be all right. You just hustle back into them mountain hideouts of your's. They never can find you there."

"Sorry, kid, but you've got to go in," Bob said. He bathed the wound, placed some cold, wet cloths against it, and bandaged it firmly with the remainder. Then, while Dare protested bitterly, he carried the younger man outside and lifted him into the saddle.

As Bernice Sibley had done, Bob climbed on behind and held Dare in the saddle as they made their way down the canyon. This they left to cross other ridges and drop into other canyons. Dare was too weak to talk much, but his worry was all about Bob and Bernice.

"If I got to hang I'm glad it's for killin' that blankety-blank marshal," he said once. "But I wish somebody else hadn't done the job."

"You wouldn't have killed him, and you know it," Bob reproved.

As the sun poured in over the valley they neared the mouth of a draw above the homestead cabin of an old bachelor called "Hardrock" Lyon. He was a crabbed old fellow who seldom neighbored with anyone, but Buckskin Bob was as good a friend as he had.

"Listen, kid," Bob said urgently, "there's smoke there so old Hardrock is home. You can ride that far yourself, and he'll get Doc Keller to come out from town. You may see me in a day or so, but I've got business I want to tend to first. I may hole up where you did part of the time. And remember that I'll be working for you all the time, and I know who to work on."

"I wish you'd beat it while you can," Dare said.

Bob patted his brother's knee. "It's not just you and me, kid, it's that girl now, and Kate. Judd can't lick us."

He gave the horse a start and the animal moved off at a walk. Bob watched breathlessly. Several times he saw the weakened Dare reel in the saddle, but each time he managed to right himself. As if sensing the weakness of his rider the horse walked slowly, and once or twice Bob could have sworn that Ribbon actually moved sideways in order to catch Dare before he fell.

Then, when Dare was more than a hundred yards from the cabin old Hardrock came rushing out. The old fellow lifted Dare down and carried him into the cabin. Ten minutes later Bob saw Hardrock fling himself onto Ribbon and gallop toward Junction. Dare would be taken care of.

It was hard for Bob not to go down to the cabin for one final look at his brother, but instead he turned his steps doggedly up the canyon.

HE WAS now a hunted man. He didn't believe they could convict him for the murder of Clyde Sivert, and he knew that Bull Davis had not been shot. But they would hold him in jail long enough for them to hang Dare for

Marshal Lee's murder, and ruin the life of the wonderful girl who had risked her liberty and reputation to help Dare. For their sakes Buckskin Bob had to become a law-dodger until he somehow secured evidence of Dare's innocence.

The hunt wasn't long starting. Buckskin Bob was trudging through the brush along the foothills above Junction two hours later when he saw a posse galloping pell-mell toward the cabin of Hardrock Lyon. He smiled grimly. Nearly an hour before he had seen Doc Keller's buggy fairly burning up that same road. By this time Dare would be on his way back to town, and Doc would know enough to take a roundabout road so there would be no lynching party—at least not now. Old Hardrock had used his head.

Bob crouched down to rest. He was keeping as close to the open country as he dared. He was sure that the enemy would be scouring the higher country in a short time.

How thorough that search was to be he was not yet aware, but already the big Consolidated Mines had been shut down, and every miner armed with a gun, and given orders to shoot Buckskin Bob Henderson on sight.

CHAPTER 6

BUCKSKIN BOB was coming over a low ridge when he sighted the first of the miners. There were four of them in the party, on foot, as if they might be hunting quail. They did, indeed, have a dog.

It was only the dog Bob feared. He ducked back hastily, and ran toward a group of sarvis bushes. He dropped down behind the biggest one and waited. The men came in sight over the ridge, and stopped to hold confab.

To his relief they seemed to think there was little use searching the scattered brush below, and they began to veer the other way. The dog had dropped behind, but as the men walked on the animal got Bob's scent. It was a mongrel, and was as likely to follow one scent as another, but it was coming straight toward Bob at a trot.

"Hey, Bill, where's that pot-licker of yore's goin'?" one of the men shouted, and all four men stopped to watch the dog.

Twenty feet away the dog caught sight of Bob. It stopped, barked and bristled.

"What's he treed?" a man yelled.

"Prob'ly a porcupine," replied the owner of the dog. "It's behind that bush, whatever it is, an' I don't want that fool dog gittin' his nose full o' quills. Hey, Shep, come back here!"

The dog redoubled the fury of its barking and began to circle.

"Better go see what it is," one man called.

"I'll bring him back," retorted the owner, and raising his rifle let drive a bullet which centered the bush behind which Bob crouched. A foot lower and it would have centered his back.

The dog was gun-shy. Despite the narrowness of his escape Bob wanted to laugh as the dog tucked its tail between its legs and raced back toward its master.

"Dumb master, dumb dog," Bob reflected, but it had been a close call. He knew now that it was unsafe to move at all in daylight. He might have done better to have stayed in Dare's hiding place, but that was a long way up, and mere inaction would get him nowhere. There were people around Junction he wanted to see.

When the four men were out of sight Bob moved to a thicker clump of brush a few hundred yards distant, where he could have some freedom of movement, and prepared to spend the day.

It wasn't an hour before another party of miners came along below the route of the first party. Bob broke into

a sweat. Had he stayed where he was he would have been seen.

But a greater danger was to come. It was perhaps two o'clock when half a dozen horsemen appeared riding *down* the ridge where he had seen the men with the dog. At their head rode none other than Lucius Judd. But the man with the dog, now mounted, was in the party. As usual, the dog trailed behind.

When the party stopped they were no more than fifty yards from where Buckskin Bob lay.

"Right about here, you say is where your dog saw something?" Judd asked in his booming voice.

"Yeah, but ole Buckskin Bob wouldn't been hidin' in a place like this," the miner replied.

"Like hell he wouldn't! He was at Hardrock Lyon's. Just what he'd do would be to skulk along the foothills. I'll bet that dog had more brains than all four of you fools." Judd turned his horse and rode straight toward the spot where Bob lay hidden. Had he come another two rods he would have died.

"Wait, Mr. Judd," the miner said anxiously. "It wasn't here the dog treed that porcupine, it was lower down—right among them sarvises yonder.

Judd turned his horse again, and the party rode down to the bush and dismounted.

Bob had erased his tracks the best he could, and had been careful to leave no tracks to his present hiding place. But Judd was no fool. Bob saw the mining man point at the ground and the others gathered round. Evidently they had found a track which Bob hadn't wiped out. Their actions showed plainly that they now knew the dog had been barking at a man and not a porcupine. Bob could see the miner cringe as Judd tongue-walloped him. Then the fellow turned and kicked the dog, which retired howling with surprise and pain.

The situation was still precarious as the men moved around that clump of brush in ever widening circles, searching for tracks.

"We're wasting time," Judd called at last. "He wouldn't have stuck around here. He's trying to get back to Junction, or reach some old mine tunnel. Come on, we can overtake him."

Judd's deductions were not far from being right. Junction was Bob's destination, and he had thought some of using an old abandoned mine tunnel close by as a hideout.

Judd might turn back long before the afternoon was over, but if Bob tried to move he might encounter other groups of searching men. It angered him to be hunted down like he had seen a whole neighborhood turn out to hunt down a bear. At the end the bear had turned, and with frothing mouth and frenzied eyes hurled itself upon its tormentors, but only to fall dead before it reached one of them. Buckskin Bob wondered if his end would be like that. For the sake of Dare and that girl he had to stay alive.

TWICE more that afternoon he heard a posse, but they didn't come within sight. It was the miners on foot who were in his vicinity. The really dangerous men were roving the high croppings on horseback. He felt tremendous relief when at last dusk began to creep over the foothills.

He realized that his chief antagonist was a wily and daring opponent. Judd was quite likely to guess that Bob would seek to return to town to get in touch with his brother, or with Kate Brewster. But it wasn't Kate nor Dare that he mean to see.

As soon as it was dark he moved out into the open country, avoiding roads and trails. He was as much mountain man as cowboy, so that walking was not as difficult for him as it would have been for Dare, for instance. Still, however, he would have welcomed a horse.

He had to cross the main road leading from the isolated ranches around his own place, and he stopped to take careful stock. He heard the thrum of a horse's feet coming from town and he flattened himself behind some giant sage along an old fence row bordering the road. No sooner had the horseman loomed in view than Bob recognized the easy gait of his own horse, Ribbon. The slightly humpbacked figure of the rider was old Hardrock Lyon.

Buckskin Bob decided to take a chance. "Hardrock!" he called softly as the man came abreast.

Hardrock sawed back on the reins with unnecessary violence, almost causing Ribbon to rear. "Who zat?" he hissed.

"Bob Hederson. Just ride over this way, but don't get off. Think you're bein' followed?"

"Could be. The so an' so's been questionin' me all day."

"How's Dare?"

"Still alive. Doc Keller tuk him to Kate Brewster's so Kate could nuss him. But there's a heap o' talk, Buckskin."

"What talk?" Bob asked sharply.

"Lynchin' talk. That snake editor is workin' it up. Says if Dare don't tell where he was hid out they oughta hang him, an' says they oughta hang him fer killin' George Lee anyhow."

"I was afraid of that."

"It won't be easy. You boys got friends who'll do whut they kin to stop it, but if Judd turns loose them three hundred miners who work fer him mebbe they ain't nothin' they kin do."

"Isn't anyone guardin' the house?"

"Yep, there is. Bull Davis, that special deputy that Ribbon kicked last night."

"He wasn't hurt?" Bob asked incredulously.

"Just got the wind knocked out of him. If Ribbon'd been shod mighta been diff'runt."

"What about Miss Sibley? Did you hear anything about her?"

Hardrock spat tobacco juice to register disgust. "They arrested her last night right after you got away. There was a hot time, I guess. Kate stood in the door with a pan of boilin' water an' threatened to scald anybody who stepped inside her door. Finally, the gal herself got her calmed down, an' they agreed not to take her to jail till Kate had a chance to git bail. She went out and got George Gadsby, the richest man in town, to put it up."

"Good old Kate," Bob murmured.

"Look, you want this horse, don't you?"

"That would be a sure way to get myself caught," Bob refused. "You keep him, but I'm glad you happened along."

Old Hardrock rode on. Ribbon nickered as if wondering aloud why it was this awkward rider instead of his master on his back. Bob carefully crossed the road, and from then on took his time.

After midnight he came to an old, long abandoned two-story log hotel surrounded by smaller deserted buildings which stood just across the river from the town of Junction. Once these buildings had been Junction, but the proximity of the mines on the other side of the river had caused a newer, less primitive town to spring up over there.

It wasn't the safest place in the world to try to hide, but it was the best one he knew.

Buckskin Bob entered the doorless doorway and approached what remained of the mahogany bar. He listened carefully, then ascended the ancient, creaking stairs. All furniture had long since disappeared from the rooms, but many of them still had doors intact, although every window was devoid of glass. It was a ghost house, and tales of the crimes committed inside its walls had a tendency to keep the children of

Junction away from it — especially at night.

BOB found a room with a dilapidated pair of springs upon an old, decrepit bedstead, and stretched out to rest. Years of sleeping anywhere made it easy for him to drop off. But he was just as easily awakened, and when he suddenly sat up on the creaking springs he knew that he wasn't alone in the old hotel.

Complete stillness pervaded the building. Buckskin Bob dared not move lest the springs creak again. He held the pose for three long minutes. Then he distinctly heard the sound of a human voice.

With infinite caution he swung his long legs over the edge of the bed, and got to his feet. The springs protested only mildly. He moved to the door. The voices were coming from the old barroom. He had to move to the very head of the stairs before he could hear a word.

"If you ask me you'll never catch sight of Buckskin Bob Henderson, let alone capture him alive," a voice said. The speaker was Tom Haines, the editor.

The next voice belonged to Lucius Judd. "I don't think this Henderson is as tough as you natives think. If my men hadn't been such fools we'd have had him today."

"You might have killed him, but you couldn't have got him alive. And you said you had to have him alive," a third voice said. Bob knew that one, too, and it came as a distinct shock. The man was George Gadsby, a retired stockman and former sheriff, who had invested his not inconsiderable fortune in the branch line railroad reaching to Junction. Gadsby was a man whom Bob had always counted as a loyal friend. He knew that Kate Brewster trusted him, too. Gadsby according to Hardrock, had put up bail for Bernice Sibley.

Even as he realized that Gadsby's presence was probably the reason for the meeting being held in this secret spot so his connection with Judd would not be known, Bob listened for Judd's reply.

"He owns a half interest in the Lost Soldier, and we've got to have it immediately. And we've got to have the Brewster woman's share. If I'd known they owned it in the first place it could have been handled, but I thought it belonged to that girl."

"It should be easy," Tom Haines' snickering voice chimed in. "Buckskin Bob would give his neck to save that worthless brother of his, and old Kate Brewster would do the same for Bob. Everybody knows she's got a case on the gent."

Judd grunted. "We've got to get our hands on this Buckskin Bob. The Brewster woman knows where he is, or where he'll be. Now here's your orders."

Bob had been leaning far over the banister in order to hear, and suddenly the rotting timbers started to give way. There was a dismal creak, but he jerked back before anything broke.

"What's that?" four voices shouted as one.

CHAPTER 7

THERE was sudden silence as Bob drew back. If they started up those stairs there was small chance that any of them would ever reach the top—or that any of them would get back to the bottom alive. Buckskin Bob was too good a shot for that.

Wholesale slaughter would do him no good, and he hoped they wouldn't come.

"Damned funny noises coming from

up there tonight," came the chattering voice of a half-breed known as Injun Charley.

"Aw, hell, those noises can be heard every night," Tom Haines answered. "I've heard stories about the ghosts over here ever since I've been in the country."

"I don't believe in ghosts," Judd said. "I think I'll have a look up there."

Bob heard the man's footsteps nearing the bottom of the stairs, and even as he tensed there came a sudden loud creaking noise and a bang that made him jump. Then, below, Tom Haines laughed.

"That's what it is," Mr. Judd," Haines said. "The wind has come up. It's just an old shutter up there slamming against the wall."

"Sure, I've seen them swinging in the wind lots of times," Gadsby put in.

The wind had come up, and there was a weird conglomeration of sounds inside the old building. Judd didn't come up. A minute later Bob heard his voice again, but he had to strain painfully to hear the words.

"Gadsby, you say you've got the Brewster woman's confidence."

"I know I have. Hell, I put up the money for that girl's bond," Gadsby chuckled.

"All right. You tell Kate you've got an admission from Bull Davis that he fired the shot that killed Sivert. Bull will back it up, for he don't know who Sivert was to kill. Being on guard he can agree to let one of 'em slip away to tell Henderson about it. McMain, it'll be your job with Injun Charley to follow the woman to Henderson's hideout. And don't forget to have that bean-bag so you can leave a trail for us to follow."

"What happens when you trap 'em?" Tom Haines asked eagerly.

"We surround the place. Then, Gadsby, you'll go in and tell 'em that Bull is acting for me, and that we'll pull off and let Bull's statement stand only if they deed over the Lost Soldier."

"And afterward?" Haines asked. "Won't they claim it was duress?"

"They might. One would think they'd be glad to let it stand if it got Henderson out of a murder charge."

"You don't know Buckskin Bob Henderson," Gadsby said.

"I think I do," Judd stated, "but I'm willing to take you fellows' estimate of him, and we'll take no chances. While Kate Brewster and the girl are going to find Henderson you, Haines, will work up a mob to take Dare Henderson out and hang him. When Buckskin Bob hears about it he'll come after you —and that will be the end of Buckskin Bob Henderson."

"Or of me," Haines squeaked.

"Nonsense. I'll be there with McMain, and those two tough gunmen I imported from Chicago to act as guards. It'll be duck soup for Rego and Lazarus to mow down this would-be Western badman."

"I wish we didn't have to resort to murder," George Gadsby whined.

"Try and get what we've got to have some other way," Judd shot back. "It's better to bump somebody else off than spend the best years of your own life in the pen."

Was he referring to himself, or to Gadsby—or to both? Bob suspected the latter. He didn't believe Gadsby would have gone in for such cold-blooded crime if he hadn't gotten badly involved someway.

"At least no harm will come to the two women," Gadsby said in a strained voice. "And Dare Henderson deserves what he'll get for killing Marshal Lee."

"Wouldn't Kate Brewster claim then that you got her interest in the mine by duress?" Haines persisted.

"She can sue Bull Davis if she wants to," Judd laughed. "But that lady and the girl are going to sign a confession before they leave that hideout, wherever it is, that will stop either one of 'em

from ever suing anybody. If they raise any holler it'll make a nice story for your paper, Haines."

BUCKSKIN BOB didn't need to be told what Judd had in mind. The thing seemed to have been worked out to the last detail, and the murder of innocent men and ruination of women's characters meant less than nothing to the hard, greedy superintendent of the Consolidated Mines.

There was a moment when Bob Henderson was strongly tempted to start down those stairs. If he killed Judd he would spoil their plans to get hold of the mine. But he wouldn't be able to save Dare's life or his own. He might not even be able to save Kate and Bernice's reputation.

He stayed where he was while the men went outside, then watched them sneaking back across the river on foot. Well, anyway, he thought, he knew their plans, and he ought to be shrewd enough to spike them some way.

If he did nothing he knew that Kate and Bernice, believing that he was hiding under the lodged timbers up Slide Creek, would go up there to tell him about Bull Davis' offer.

The women would go the next night, for Judd had timed it that way. They would not dare delay for fear that Bob might kill somebody or get killed himself.

Kate's house would be guarded. If he tried to get in touch with her this night he would probably only spring the trap prematurely, and do nobody any good. The more he pondered the more certain he became that if he was to expose Judd and Gadsby—and nothing short of that could save him and Dare from the gallows—then he would have to wait until the following night, and take his enemies by surprise.

But in the meantime Kate had to be warned, and steps had to be taken to avert the threatened lynching of Dare. If he failed to do either one Dare would die ignominiously, and there was no telling what might happen to Kate and Bernice.

There were only two men he knew of now whom he felt he could trust—Doc Keller, and Hardrock Lyon. Hardrock was out of the question for undoubtedly his cabin was being watched. He would have to take a chance on Doc Keller.

Not quite an hour after the conspirators had left the old hotel Bob let himself out of a rear door and moved with all the stealth of which he was master to the river. He knew that the bridge might be guarded, so he moved up into a farmer's cow pasture, removed his clothes and swiftly swum the river.

Dressed again he moved silently toward the town. Dr. Keller was a widower who lived with his married daughter. In order that the family might not be disturbed he had a room at the rear of the house, with a private door at the side. It was this door that Bob had to gain, and he had to take a chance that he might be seen, or that the doctor might betray him.

He knocked so lightly that he was irritated by his own timidity, and followed it immediately with a thump that might have wakened the neighbors.

"Who's there?" came the doctor's instant response to the second knock.

"Open up, Doc, I'm in a hurry."

"I asked who it was," the doctor shouted angrily.

There were houses all around, Bob dared not name himself loud enough for the doctor to hear. "Link Newall," he replied, giving the name of Kate's star boarder. "You're wanted at the boarding house. But let me in, Doc."

It sounded as if Doc said, "Gru-mmph!" Then Bob heard him padding across the floor, and the door opened perhaps half a foot.

"Link Newall, hunh? Don't sound

like his—what the hell! Come in." Doc threw open the door as he recognized his caller, and closed it as soon as Bob was inside.

"You! Think anybody saw you?"

"I'm sure they didn't, Doc. I had to see you."

"Git shot up?"

"Haven't got a scratch. But, Doc, I've got an earful to tell you, and I've got to get out of here before it gets light. Can we talk where nobody will hear us?"

"My family sleeps like logs. This is good as any. Shoot." Doc Keller took down an ancient red bathrobe, wrapped himself up in it and prepared to listen.

"First, I want to thank you for what you've done for Dare," Bob began, "but I've come to ask you to do more because there is a plan on foot to lynch the kid tomorrow night."

"How do you know that?" the doctor snapped skeptically.

BUCKSKIN BOB talked, hoping fervently that he would be believed, although as he went along his heart sank as he saw disbelief rising in the doctor's face.

"My God, Doc," he cried in despair, "why would I lie to you about this? They deliberately murdered George Lee so Dare could be blamed for it, and they tried just as coldbloodedly to murder that fellow Davis so I'd be blamed."

"Why?"

"Because they want a mine that Kate Brewster and me own in common. What it seems to mean is that the Consolidated Mines are petering out, and they've found a way to get at the rich ore in the Lost Soldier."

"Where does Gadsby come in?"

"I don't know, except that he's interested in the railroad. If the mines close what good will his railroad be?"

"I'd like to know. I put ten thousand dollars into that railroad," Keller said surprisingly.

"Suppose Gadsby hadn't financed the railroad on the up and up?" Bob argued. "Judd intimated that he would go to the pen if they don't get this mine."

"But wholesale murder? That's hard to believe."

"Doc, listen: I gambled my life coming to you. All I ask is that you keep still until Gadsby has a talk with Kate. If he comes to her and says that Davis will take the blame for killing Sivert will you believe me?"

Dr. Keller looked thoughtful. "I suppose I'd have to, Bob—if Kate were to tell me."

"I think she will. If she don't, ask her."

"If I do believe you, what do you want me to do?"

Bob gave a sigh of relief. "I want you to warn Kate of what's up. She must play their game. She must start out like she intended to find me. McMain and Injun Charley will be following them. Let her be sure they don't lose the trail. She's to head right up Foreman's Gulch as soon as she strikes the hills. I'll meet her there, but she is not to stop, and not to speak to me. Just ride right on, and get out of the gulsh as soon as she can and come back to town."

"If you killed a couple of men I wonder just how guilty I'd be," the doctor wondered.

"I promise you I won't kill anybody unless I have to. It's to my interest to take them alive. And I'm depending on you to keep Dare away from that mob."

"That's going to be an assignment—if you happen to be telling the truth."

"Good lord, Doc, did I ever lie to you?" Bob burst out.

"I don't think you ever did, and I don't think you are now," Keller replied. "I'll do what I can. Fortunately, Dare isn't as badly hurt as I made out, and he's doing all right. He could walk if he had to, a little ways. I'll do the

best I can."

"If Hardrock Lyon comes to town you can trust him to help."

"I think I'll need all the help I can get," Dr. Keller remarked grimly.

"Now I'd better be getting back to my lodgings," Bob said sardonically, rising.

"You might escape detection all day there, and you might not," Keller said thoughtfully. "I've got a couple of rooms overhead where I sometimes keep patients. I think you'd be perfectly safe there until I can move Dare in."

"What about your daughter's family?"

"They never come near there. They're trained."

"All right, Doc, I'll take it."

"And now, my boy, I'll see about getting you something to eat. I may not be much of a doctor, but I am a good cook," Keller smiled.

Half an hour later Bob was sitting down to a much needed piping hot meal, and when he had finished he went upstairs, and stretched his body on the softest bed he had been in for months. It was just then coming dawn.

CHAPTER 8

BUCKSKIN BOB'S sleep was fitful. Too many things fraught with problems of life or death were happening that day for him to release his mind despite his physical fatigue and the great need for rest. Yet at times he did drop into light sleep for a few minutes at a time, but when awake it was hard to keep away from the window overlooking the town.

He wanted to see what his enemies were doing, but almost as much he wanted a glimpse of Bernice Sibley. No woman had ever made the impact upon him that she had. She had, in his estimation, proved herself. What a mate for a man she would be! If Dare got out of this scrape what a lucky fellow he would be. For a moment Bob had a feeling almost of jealousy, which he ruthlessly rooted out of his mind. Jealous of Dare! It was ridiculous. Buckskin Bob Henderson wasn't a marrying man anyway. Besides, he thought grimly, another sunrise might find both of them dead.

Noon came and he knew that there was no more sleep for him. He could hear Doc Keller's grand-children whooping it up downstairs, and the sound of their joyous voices made him melancholy. He wished Doc would show up for just a moment; anything to relieve the terrible suspense of waiting.

He examined his gun, a .38 caliber on a .44 frame, a weapon he had used a long time, and one that he knew wouldn't fail him. That, and a few long strings of tough whang leather was all the equipment he needed.

Just once he yielded to temptation, and moved over to the window. He drew back quickly as he caught sight of Bernice hurrying in his direction. But he almost forgot himself as he saw Lucius Judd emerge from a doorway almost abreast of the girl.

Judd called to the girl, and she stopped unwillingly. Bob stood well back from the window, and his hand caressed the butt of his gun. Bernice had been subjected to gross indignity on the streets of Junction once; if she was going to be insulted again then Bob was going to that window, and Lucius Judd's mortal career was going to terminate.

Plainly, Judd was threatening the girl. Bernice didn't say anything, but her face showed her loathing. Then she stepped around the man and hurried on. Judd made no attempt to stop her, fortunately.

Two minutes later Bob heard the girl's voice in the room below him. "Doctor Keller," she said. "I wish

you'd come over at once. It's Dare. His fever is rising badly. "I—I'm afraid he is much worse."

"I'll go right over, miss," Doc Keller replied.

Why didn't Doc Keller tell her that he was upstairs? Didn't the man know that it was his brother who was about to die? If he could just talk to Bernice he could tell her himself what she and Kate were to do. Then, when he heard them leave the house together, for a brief moment he almost hated his old friend.

The longest day he had ever known drew to a close at last, and as darkness settled he was able to stay nearer the window, watching eagerly for the doctor's return. There wasn't much time left if he was to get where he wanted to be when his enemies came along.

Then, suddenly, he heard the doctor's voice talking to his daughter. Would he never come up those stairs?

After ten long minutes he heard Doc's weary steps coming slowly up the stairs.

"My God, Doc," he blurted, "how's Dare?"

Doc's face looked strained and weary in the dusk. "It don't look so good," Keller answered. "This is the crisis. If he lives till midnight he'll pull through."

"You mean he can't be moved?"

"That's about it. Unexpected change. Can't move him without a stretcher and at least two men. Not much chance of doing that secretly, but—"

"What about Gadsby, Doc? Did he make the proposition to Kate?"

"He did. I'm afraid it looks like you're right, Bob. I warned Kate. She'll go tonight."

"Have you got some long strips of court plaster, Doc?"

"Certainly, but what do you want of it? Going to start competition with me?"

"It might be handier than a bandage," Bob said.

DOC stepped to a closet and came back with a twelve inch strip of black court plaster. "Long enough?" he queried.

"It's plumb ample," Bob replied, and stowed it carefully away in his pocket with the string of whang leather.

"They've hunted hard for you all day," Doc volunteered, "and I happen to know that a bunch of town people searched all the old buildings across the river."

Bob felt more gratitude toward the doctor than his tongue could express. "I owe you a lot, Doc," he said.

"I don't know that I've helped either you or Dare," Keller stated. "You may both be dead men before morning."

"If we are, Doc, I think I can promise you that one or two people who've been pollutin' the earth around here lately won't be here either," Bob remarked evenly.

Doc looked out of the window, and said, "I think it will be safe for you to leave here any time. My saddle horse is out in the barn. You'll be better off on him than afoot."

"Thanks. I won't need him going out, but I may need him coming back," Bob said grimly. "I'll be in a hurry."

Doc brought up another meal, which his daughter thought was for a patient, and after he had eaten Bob let himself out the side door and made his way to the stable. Doc's tough little buckskin cayuse was saddled.

Once clear of town Bob let the buckskin take an easy lope until they reached a deep slit in the face of the mountain called Foreman's Gulch. It was full of old prospect holes, but no rich ore had ever been discovered there.

Bob stopped some three miles from town and cut off a short piece from the strip of court plaster. "I hate to do this to you, Buck, for you're a good pony," he said as he stuck the pony's lips together with the plaster, "but I just can't

afford to let you holler."

He led the pony a short distance up the trail and tied it in a clump of pines. Then he went back to wait.

In an hour or so Kate Brewster should be coming along, ostensibly to seek Bob in his secret hiding place. Undoubtedly she would be followed by Ed McMain, and Injun Charley. And behind them would be Lucius Judd and a group of his hard cases.

The job ahead of him was full of peril, and the slightest miscalculation might well prove fatal. Yet Bob's thoughts were back in Junction with his wounded brother, and the girl who loved him. Before he could get back there the mob which was to lynch Dare might have done its brutal work. He wasn't sure that he could stop it if he did get back in time.

It was a moderately dark night, with a few stars shining, but there would be no moon until after midnight. Fleecy clouds floated lazily over the sky so that the light was never exactly the same, and deep in the wooded canyon it was almost dark.

Bob had no fear of Ed McMain, for all that the fellow was reputedly a gunfighter. It was the sly, furtive-eyed moocher known as Injun Charley he feared might give him trouble. That half-breed was as evanescent as a shadow. A known thief, he had once looted Bob's Buckskin camp, and getting proof of it Bob had laid open the scoundrel's back with a quirt. Since then Bob had had several close "accidents" which he had attributed to Injun Charley. If the half-breed succeeded in getting away all his plans would be wrecked.

Almost two hours passed before Buckskin Bob's straining ears heard what sounded like an approaching horseman. Several times previously he had been fooled by wandering cattle or range horses, but this time he plainly heard a horse sneeze, and soon he caught the creak of saddle leather. It must be Kate.

Right here the trail ran along an embankment, perhaps twenty feet above a dry wash in the bottom. Bob had chosen the spot well. He crouched behind a huge sarvis bush just above the trail. Anyone he halted would have to stop, turn directly up the hill toward him—or go over the edge of the wash.

Then a horseman appeared through the opening in the aspens just below, and Bob recognized Kate's strip-faced bay. He stood up and when the horseman was ten feet away he spoke. "Hello," he said, "you're on time."

THE rider gave a start, momentarily pulled up on the reins, and then she raised her face. It was not Kate Brewster, it was Bernice!

Bob was jolted. His first fear was that something had gone wrong; his second was fear that Bernice might come to harm. He had counted on Kate. He didn't know just what the girl would do. Her present alarm was not reassuring.

Kate's strip-faced bay had stopped. For a moment it appeared ready to swap ends. If the girl wasn't a good rider she might get spilled.

"Steady," he said quickly. "It's me —Bob Henderson."

"Of course," Bernice answered. "It was foolish of me to get spooky. I was expecting you to meet me, but I'm quite nervous, and I—I—was expecting to see you before you spoke, I guess."

"Why didn't Kate come?"

"We—we—thought it better if—if I came instead," Bernice said with a confusion Bob couldn't understand.

"Do you know if you're being followed?"

"I feel as if I were. It—it's gruesome."

"Listen carefully. Ride on past me to those pine trees just ahead. You'll find my horse there. No matter what

happens don't move or cry out."

"Please be careful," she begged, as she nodded and rode on.

Bob watched her out of sight, then turned his attention to the trail below. His nerves tingled. It couldn't be long now until the climax of his counter thrust against his enemies was at hand. It would only be the first step if he were successful, but failure at this point would mean failure in everything. The last and only chance to prove Dare's innocence would be gone.

Then, right where he had first seen Kate's strip-faced bay appear he saw a man on foot. The fellow hesitated for a moment, then came on with a swift, tireless pace. The long, lanky form, and the dilapidated old hat identified the man as Injun Charley. But where, Bob thought wildly, was Ed McMain. He had counted upon the two men being together.

CHAPTER 9

INJUN CHARLEY was less than a a rod from Bob when Ed McMain appeared on horseback. Bob faced a grim puzzle. McMain was the man he wanted; he was the one who could tell the truth about Marshal Lee's murder. If he tried to hold up Injun Charley McMain would get away. If he let the half-breed pass then Bernice would be in danger.

He had to play it one way, and try to get them both. Injun Charley had stopped as if suspecting something. Bob could actually see the fellow's nostrils distend. Then he came on with his bent-kneed mountaineer's gait, his black eyes peering ahead for sight of the girl.

Injun Charley was six feet away when Bob spoke. "Hold it, Charley, or I'll bust you right in the guts," Bob's low voice said inelegantly, but with compelling force.

The half-breed's stature seemed to decrease by a foot as he bent his knees for a swift spring. His dark eyes glanced toward Bob, lighted with recognition, then looked away.

"For why?" he asked. "I am not your enemy."

"Just act like one till McMain comes along," Bob ordered. "Turn half around, and motion for him to come on —*not to go back*. Make any move to let him know I'm here, Charley, and you'll get a bullet right where it'll hurt the worst."

"Sure," the breed agreed. He half turned, and plainly motioned the horseman to come on. Instead of coming on hurriedly McMain stopped; thereby almost getting Injun Charley shot. A moment later McMain kicked his horse in the flanks and came on.

When a couple of rods away McMain asked anxiously, "What's up? Why did you stop?"

"I think the girl she stop," Injun Charley answered. "If you look—" he turned as if to point, and did—straight toward Buckskin Bob.

Bob Swung his gun toward McMain. He had to. "Lift 'em, Ed!" he called sternly, and McMain's hands started to go up.

Then something happened. Injun Charley's knees had remained bent. Now they suddenly straightened, and he leaped over the edge of the trail like an arrow released from a taut bowstring.

Bob jerked his gun around, but didn't fire. He might have missed, and a shot was the last thing he wanted to have happen. But in that instant Ed McMain thought he saw his chance. He dropped his hands, his right one striking for his gun, as he reined his horse about with the other hand. He was too far away to reach. Bob had to fire.

Bob's shot came a trifle ahead of his foe's. His slug struck McMain's body just above the waist-line, while Mc-

Main's merely dug into the side of the hill.

McMain's grip on the reins tightened as he tried to keep from falling out of the saddle. It enabled Bob to leap out and grab the horse even as McMain's body plunged head foremost to the ground. As the man fell a sack of white navy beans deluged upon the ground. He had been marking the trail with those beans, and it had been part of Bob's plan to have Kate, or Bernice, since it was she who had come, take the bean-bag and leave a false trail that would take Judd and the men with him far from town.

That plan had been spoiled by Injun Charley's escape. Everything had been spoiled. Bob had planned to bind and gag his prisoners until the larger party passed on by, then work on Ed McMain until he forced a confession. But Injun Charley had gotten away, and McMain was probably dying.

Clinging to the horse Bob stood astride the screaming McMain. "Shut up," he hissed, "or I'll put another one into you."

McMain silenced his screams. "I can't stand this," he moaned. "I'm dyin'."

"You'll die before Judd and his bunch gits up here if you don't tell me the truth," Bob rasped. "Who killed Marshal Lee? I know it was you and Sivert. One of you killed Lee, the other shot Dare. Which was which?"

"I killed Lee," the man confessed readily. "It was Sivert who shot your brother."

"It didn't really matter." Bob shot out. "How much did Judd pay you?"

"Five hundred—oh, I can't stand this." The fellow rolled up until he he looked like a giant snail groveling in the path. There was no use to question him further.

BOB sprang onto McMain's horse and rode hurriedly up to where Bernice waited beside Doc Keller's buckskin.

White-faced, the girl said tremblingly, "I heard those shots. I—I thought those men had got you."

"You were brave to stay," he told her. "I failed miserably. One of them got away and I had to shoot the other one."

"I don't know what you hoped to do, but I'm sorry," she said. "Can't you go on to our hiding place, and be safe there till you can get out of the country?"

"I could, but I'm not going to," he answered bluntly. "Those hell-hounds are planning to hang Dare even when he may be dying anyhow. He's too weak to defend himself, but I'm not. I'm going back to Junction."

"We'll go together," she said. "I knew you'd go back anyway."

"How did you know that?" he asked, almost sharply.

"Dare told me a lot about you when we were hiding out, and Kate told me a lot more. They both think you're wonderful."

"I'm a fizzle and a failure," he said shortly.

"I don't think so," Bernice said. "I think they were right about you."

He had untied Buck, and now, leading the animal he headed back through the timber along the side of the gulch. Bernice followed silently.

When they reached the top of the ridge he stopped. "Injun Charley has told his story," he said. "They're travelling up the gulch fast.

They were soon in the next gulch. Here Bob abandonel McMain's mount and transferred to the doctor's buckskin. He headed for town at a run, not caring whether the girl kept up with him or not, and not really expecting her to. To his surprise she stayed right behind him.

"You don't have to ride like that, Bernice," he called back. "Take it

easy."

"I'm staying with you," she replied.

It was an easy matter to beat Judd's party back to town, but what Judd would do now he didn't know.

Before they reached the edge of the town they heard a buzzing sound, which quickly became perceptible as the roar of a mob. Venal Tom Haines was doing his job. He was raising a mob to take a dying boy from his bed and hang him. Bob urged Buck to still greater speed, and still the girl on the strip-faced bay kept pace with him.

The mob had not yet reached Kate's place at the edge of Junction. Bob stopped, flung the buckskin's reins to Bernice. "You go on in," he ordered. "Tell Doc, if he's there, that I'm in town."

Bernice held out her hand. "Goodbye," she said. "Good luck."

Bob took her hand. It was still blistered and sore from digging, but she didn't flinch. Then, with a catch in her breath she rode on toward the rooming house.

Buckskin Bob hurried toward the main street where the mob was forming. Many of its members were still inside the three saloons, but more were in the street between the Junction Gazette and the town office of Consolidated Mines at the very head of the street.

Most of the men, but not all, were miners. They were cursing and yelling; loudly demanding that Dare Henderson be hanged to preserve law and order in Junction.

There were a few little groups of men who seemed to stand apart, disapproving, but helpless and bewildered. There were enough drunken miners to take the town apart if they became aroused.

As yet there had been no opposition to the mob. Doc Keller, at least, would speak up for Dare. Bob knew that. But if the mob got worked up enough they would ride rough-shod over Doc, or even Kate.

The street lights of Junction were poor. Bob was not likely to be recognized unless he came face to face with someone he knew, and that he meant to avoid. There was a light in the office of the Gazette. Bob worked his way around to the rear of that building, and crouched for a moment in the shadow.

He tried the back door, but it was locked. He stood there for a few minutes while the yells from outside grew louder. They were distinct now.

"Come on, Haines, let's get started."

THEN, suddenly Bob heard someone fumbling with the door on the inside, and it started to open. He heard Haines' voice speaking earnestly. "You go right on home, Mrs. Lee. I assure you there will be no miscarriage of justice."

"But even if that boy did kill my husband I think he should have a fair trial," came a woman's plaintive, troubled voice.

"That's just what I've been telling you, Mrs. Lee. We're not going to hang him; we're just goin' to see that he goes to jail where he belongs. Otherwise, we'll wake up some morning and Henderson will be gone."

"Those men don't sound like they had such plans."

The woman was outside, but she didn't see Buckskin Bob. She was a little old lady whom Bob had seen many times. Completely cowed by her bullying, blustering husband she had seemed next thing to a perfect nonentity. That she could speak up for real law and order, a thing in which her marshal husband had not believed indicated that she had character.

Tom Haines patted the old lady's shoulder. "That's just whiskey talking, Mrs. Lee," he said smugly. "You just leave it to me."

Buckskin Bob took a long step forward and his hand shot out to seize Haines' wrist just as the editor started to withdraw it. The sudden yank brought Haines clear outside. His incipient yell was cut short as Bob's other hand fastened around his throat.

Mrs. Lee whirled around, and gasped. Before she could speak Bob said, "I'll not hurt him, Mrs. Lee. It's you I want to talk to. I can prove that my brother never shot your husband."

For a moment he thought she was going to cry out the alarm, but she didn't. "Don't choke the man," she said.

Bob loosened his grip enough for Haines to breathe, but the fear of death was in the man's eyes. Bob forced Haines back into the room where his paper was printed. The air was stale with the smell of printer's ink.

"Please come in a moment, Mrs. Lee," Bob begged. "I assure you that you won't be harmed."

To his surprise the little woman picked up her skirt daintily and stepped inside. Bob kicked the door shut. The only light in this room came from the lamp in the front office through a partly open door.

"Listen to me, Haines," Bob growled ferociously, "I heard you get your orders from Lucius Judd to lynch my brother. If you open your mouth till I ask you to speak, God have mercy on your skull." He let his hand slip to Haines' collar, and his other hand rested frankly on the butt of his gun.

He had little time. He had to talk fast if he was to gain any advantage at all.

"Mrs. Lee, your husband was sent to his death by Lucius Judd, who wanted to frame my brother on a murder charge. Ed McMain was the man who killed Lee, and Clyde Sivert shot my brother. I got hold of McMain tonight while he and Injun Charley were trying to follow Miss Sibley to my hiding place. He confessed everything, even to the amount of money they were paid—five hundred dollars."

He left Haines quiver. That amount of money was the only specific thing he had to go on, and it worked. He could see by Tom Haines' face that the fellow believed McMain had confessed. How otherwise, could Henderson have known how much the murderers had been paid?

"You—you are sure of this, young man?" Mrs. Lee gasped.

"I know it. So does Tom Haines. He won't dare deny it. Go ahead, Haines, tell Mrs. Lee the truth."

WITH Buckskin Bob's blazing eyes upon him, and his own eyes fixed hypnotically upon the handle of Henderson's gun, Haines dared not lie.

"It—it's the truth, Mrs. Lee," he blurted. "I'm sorry, but—"

"And you had your orders to raise a mob and lynch my brother while Judd and Gadsby were out rounding me up by a lying trick, didn't you?"

"Yes, but I had to—"

"I haven't got time for any more, Mrs. Lee," Bob said hurriedly. "Those wolves will be in here any minute looking for Haines. I'm taking him away. I want you to go to Kate Brewster's and when that mob comes for my brother tell them the truth. Will you do it?"

"Of course I will," Mrs. Lee promised.

"Come on, Haines," Bob said grimly, and thrust the quaking little editor outside.

Mrs. Lee followed them.

Already members of the mob were pounding at Haines' front door. Bob, with Haines at a run ahead of him, wasn't three rods from the back door when Haines' absence was discovered.

"Hell!" a voice roared from the inside. "He's gone!"

CHAPTER 10

WHILE Mrs. Lee moved to the left with calm dignity, Buckskin Bob reached the shadow of a store with his prisoner. He had his gun pressed against Haines' back now, and the fellow sprinted with great zeal to escape its menacing pressure.

Bob kept close behind. Haines ran with low, moaning sounds issuing from his throat.

Bob had no intention of going far. His great immediate fear was that the mob would surround Mrs. Lee and get the truth from her prematurely.

They reached the bank of the river, and he jerked Haines to a stop. A pasture fence here ended against the stream. It was four feet down to the water. The post was solid. Bob forced Haines to his knees, and made the man put his hands behind his back and around the post. He tied them there securely with a whang leather string, then cut off a piece of the black court plaster and stuck it securely over the editor's mouth.

"I think that'll hold you, Haines," he stated grimly.

The howls of the mob had grown louder and more insistent. They seemed to be milling in the street, but suddenly they seemed to have found a new leader, for there was a sudden, concerted rush toward Kate Brewster's boarding house.

Bob legged it frantically down the river. He crossed the road, and then cut back behind the section houses to reach the rear of Kate's place.

The mob was there ahead of him, easily a hundred drunken, blood-mad men. Bob fingered his gun. He was close to the fence behind which Clyde Sivert was lying when he died. How delighted that mob would be if they could only know that the man they were really after was within the sound of their voices.

Bob's hate was hot, but his mind cool. Before that mob got Dare they would face blazing guns, and not all of them would live to gloat over their victim.

Some sort of colloquoy was going on at the front of the house for the mob stilled briefly. Then a stentorian voice bellowed, "We want Dare Henderson, Doc. If you don't bring him out we're goin' in after him.

For a minute the mob's yells drowned every other sound, then Doc's voice could be heard again. "There's two reasons you can't have Dare Henderson. One is that he's dead. The other is that we've just learned who did kill Marshal Lee—and it wasn't Dare."

It was dramatically done; probably the only thing that could have gained the mob's attention, yet Doc's words went through Bob's heart like a knife. *Dare dead.* He had half expected it, yet he wasn't prepared for the shock it gave him.

"Who says he didn't kill Lee?" someone yelled.

"This lady," Doc roared back. "George Lee's widow!"

"It's true," Mrs. Lee cried out. Her voice didn't reach far. Bob couldn't hear her at all, nor see her, yet somehow he knew that she was backed by Doc Keller, Kate Brewster, and probably Hardrock Lyon. He couldn't envision Bernice being there. She would be with Dare.

"What's she say?" someone at the rear of the mob demanded.

"She says," a bull-like voice bellowed, "that Clyde Sivert and Ed McMain killed Lee for five hundred dollars. She says Tom Haines admitted it after he found out McMain had confessed."

It wasn't Doc's voice; Bob didn't know whose voice it was. Anyway, it was drowned out by the astounded

voices of the mob.

"Where is Haines?" somebody suddenly made himself heard. "Damn him, he organized this party to hang an innocent man."

As the mob started milling back toward the saloons another voice rose high and angry. "Come back, you damned fools. This is a hoax. Ed McMain never confessed nothing to nobody. Buckskin Bob Henderson murdered him tonight."

Lucius Judd had got back to town, full of rage and disappointment.

"If it ain't true where's Tom Haines?" a man shouted.

"Yeah, where's Haines?" a dozen voices took up the refrain.

Judd's voice could be heard above the rest, arguing. "Hoax! Hoax!" he kept yelling. "The Hendersons are guilty as hell."

"A widow wouldn't lie to defend the man who killed her husband unless she was sure he was innocent," someone said, and despite the bad logic of the language it seemed to carry conviction.

THEN Buckskin Bob heard the cry he had wanted to hear. "I don't give a hang about anything!" a man cried out loudly. "All I want is a drink of whiskey!"

"Come on," others shouted, and the mob stampeded back toward the barrooms.

Bob crossed the back yard and tried the kitchen door. It opened, and he found himself looking into the staring eyes of Daisy.

"Stop it!" he snapped as the girl opened her mouth to shriek. Her jaws snapped shut, and then she giggled.

"We almost had company," Daisy said as she darted out.

As Bob started across the room Bernice entered the kitchen. She gasped slightly, then smiled. "Thank God that woman got here in time," she said. "The rest of us couldn't have stopped that mob."

"It was a break," Bob admitted. He searched the girl's face for signs of grief over Dare, but there were no tears. She looked almost happy. "Bernice," he said anxiously, "don't you love Dare?"

She had been doing something with a teakettle. She let it fall with a little crash as she gasped, "Love Dare? Why—why—in what way do you mean?"

"Well, you stood by him all the way in his trouble. I thought you loved him. I thought you'd be broken-hearted if he died."

"This is rather a funny time to discuss things like that," she answered slowly, "but if you have to have an answer I'm awfully fond of Dare, but if you mean marrying him—well, Bob. no. He's too much of a kid, maybe. Anyway, I never felt that way about him at all."

For a moment Bob was hurt and angry. With Dare lying dead in another room her statements seemed almost harsh and unfeeling.

"I'm sorry I mentioned it," he said stiffly. "I don't know what may happen. Judd will likely be back any minute. I'd like to see him just once before I go."

"Of course," she said. "I've had an awful time keeping him in bed while that mob was here. He wanted to take his gun and go out and—"

"What?" he gasped. "Do you mean —do you mean that he—that he—ain't dead?"

"Certainly he isn't dead. And he broke into a sweat a while ago. Dr. Keller said if he did that he would be all right."

Bob's knees were suddenly almost too weak to hold him up. "You must think I'm all kinds of a fool," he said. "I heard Doc tell the mob that Dare was dead."

A radiant smile broke over her face.

"Naturally he told them that. He was doing anything to stop that mob. And I certainly don't think you're a fool, Bob. I think you're the most wonderful man I ever knew."

She was looking up at him, her red lips slightly parted. Suddenly he felt such a hunger as he had never known. His arms went about her and he pressed her lips with his mouth.

An instant later, ashamed of what he had done, he released her. He was amazed to discover that her arms were about his neck, and that her lips clung to his.

They were in that posture when Kate opened the door. "Well," she asked, "playing games?"

They separated and Bernice picked up the teakettle in confusion. "Bernice just told me that Dare would live," Bob said. "I'd heard Doc say he was dead." He was painfully conscious of the redness of his face.

"We had to tell that mob that," Kate said. "But it wouldn't have done much good if that Lee woman hadn't showed up. I didn't think she had it in her. She told us Tom Haines confessed after you said you had a confession from Ed McMain."

Bob was on sure ground again. "He did, but he'll repudiate it fast enough when he finds out that McMain died and I got no confession out of him."

"Where is that dirty little crook?" Kate asked.

"Tied to a post where Crowe's north fence touches the river."

"Look, Robert: Lucius Judd is going to spread the news about McMain plenty fast. After what Mrs. Lee done they're not likely to come back here after Dare, but they'll know you're in town, and you're the one they want. You'd better be getting back to that hideout pronto."

"I'm not going back there," Bob stated.

"What are you going to do?"

"Judd's in town. So am I."

The two women understood. They wanted to say something to change his mind, but realized the hopelessness of it.

"Where's that Daisy?" Kate asked, looking around.

"I think she went out." Bob replied.

"Did she see you?"

"Yes."

"Holy cow! That mob will find it out now."

"Then I think I'll be going," Bob said. He headed for the back door. "Good-bye, girls," he said softly, and was gone.

CHAPTER 11

AS BOB reached the shadows of the fence he saw a big man entering the front gate. Dark as it was he recognized the shape of Bull Davis, the special deputy who had tried to arrest him when Sivert was killed, and who had been kicked in the breast by Ribbon. But Bob didn't wait. Fifteen minutes later he let himself into the old, deserted hotel across the river.

This time he didn't go upstairs. Instead, he moved over behind the old mahogany bar. He couldn't be sure that Judd and Gadsby would come there to discuss their problems in secrecy, but he hoped, and rather believed that they twould. They certainly had things to discuss.

He had crouched there perhaps half an hour when he heard someone furtively enter the place. Whoever it was began walking impatiently up and down the battered floor.

"I wish to God he'd hurry," the man said aloud. It was George Gadsby's voice.

Five minutes later another man arrived. This time it was Injun Charley.

"You see Judd?" Gadsby asked.

"Yes. He said he'd be over just as soon as he could find Rego and Lazarus. You know what he plans to do?"

"No. We know Bob Henderson is in town, probably hiding in Kate Brewster's house homewhere, but Judd said the mob idea was no good any more. He'll think something out," Gadsby said nervously.

Another quarter of an hour passed before the two gorillas from Chicago put in an appearance, and Judd himself trod almost on their heels.

"What do you think about it, Lucius?" Gadsby began eagerly. "Is there any way now to get the Lost Soldier before we have to do away with Henderson?"

"We've got to," Judd answered. "I just now learned that that damned doctor lied about Dare Henderson being dead. Kate's hired girl let the cat out of the bag. Both Hendersons must be there."

One of the gorillas spoke up. "You show us how to get in there and me and Lazarus will take care of both of them, and the women, too," he offered.

"It's that mine we want," Gadsby declared. "Both me and Judd will go over the road if we don't get—"

"Shut up!" Judd barked. "No use airing our troubles. I've got too much at stake to lose now. I'm going to bargain with 'em. Offer Henderson and the Brewster woman a hundred thousand dollars each for their share of the mine, and offer them a faked confession by McMain that he and Sivert killed Lee, and that Sivert was planted to kill Bull Davis when Henderson killed him."

"Good Lord!" Gadsby protested, "that'll put a rope around your own neck—and maybe mine."

"Do you think I'm a fool?" Judd rasped. "I happen to know where Tom Haines is. Injun Charley found him, and had sense enough to leave him where he was. The confession will put all blame on Haines. And Injun Charley will see to it that Haines don't live to deny it."

"I didn't want any murder," Gadsby whined, "but now that we're in it I don't see how we can be safe as long as Bob Henderson remains alive."

"Did I say he'd be left alive?" Judd queried. "He and the Brewster woman will have to come to my office. The papers are made out, and the drafts on Consolidated to pay 'em. Rego and Lazarus will be planted there, and as soon as their names are on the certificates of transfer—"

"Leave it to us, boss," Rego interposed.

"And to me," Buckskin Bob Henderson spoke, as he arose from behind the bar. He had sized the situation up; knew where every man stood. The odds were five to one, but they didn't look too great. He counted on George Gadsby and Injun Charley getting out of there if they could see any chance to save their own skins. It left Lucius Judd and the two gorillas.

His appearance was a complete surprise, and momentarily paralysis assailed every one of them. Buckskin Bob took full advantage of it. He was not fool enough to wait for them to start shooting. He fired across the bar as he arose, and the closest man, the gunman Lazarus, doubled over and sank piously to his knees with a slug in the abdomen.

THAT shot touched them off, and they reacted almost exactly as Bob had figured they would, except that Injun Charley, before he leaped through a window, turned and hurled a knife at Bob. It whizzed by his head, and striking against the wall dropped to the floor.

Judd and Rego each went for their guns. Bob fired at Judd, but that gleaming knife of Injun Charley's made him jerk back as he fired, and he

missed. The next moment Judd's bullet whipped across the top of the bar, and Bob felt a burning, searing pain in his left side.

Deadly cool now Bob steadied and the flame that leaped from his gun touched Judd's breast. He heard the sodden impact of the slug as it struck.

An answering streak of orange-colored flame lanced at Bob from Rego's gun, but as he fired at Judd, Bobb leaned far back, and he felt only the drag of the bullet through his shirt. Fire stabbed again through the smoke-filled barroom of the old hotel which might have known such scenes in its palmy days many years earlier, and this time the thrust ended in Rego's face, the .38 slug practically tearing off the top of the gunman's head.

Judd was staggering now, but he fired again, his bullet striking against the still solid mahogany of the old bar. Once more Bob fired at the blurred shape that was the reeling Judd, and the man went down. The gun battle was over.

Voices from outside assailed Bob's ears, but he was getting a little sick, and after all he had killed the man who most deserved to die. "All right," he said, "Come on."

The voice he heard was Doc Keller's. "Are you all right, Bob? Hold your fire and we'll come in."

"Come on, I'm all right," Bob said. leaning upon the bar for support.

Doc entered, followed by Hardrock Lyon and Bull Davis. Each of the two last marched a prisoner in front of him—Gadsby and Injun Charley.

"I figured you'd come here hoping to find these birds, so I gathered up these boys and we've been outside listening to the whole thing," Doc said.

"I wish I'd got that Judd," Bull Davis roared. "Him hirin' me as a special deputy, then plannin' to git me bumped off just so somebody else could be blamed for a murder."

Buckskin Bob spent the rest of that night in the same room with Dare, but in the morning, despite his deep flesh wound, he insisted upon getting up.

Between them Gadsby and Haines had cleared everything up. The Consolidated Mines had been petering out. Secretly, Judd and Gadsby had been using Consolidated Mines and railroad money to dig a tunnel into ore bodies of their own.

Their own claims had not turned out as well as they had hoped, but their tunnel had drained the water from the proven rich Lost Soldier mine which Joel Sibley had discovered, making the operation of that mine feasible. They had had to get possession of it before its owners found out what had happened, and before their own peculations were discovered.

Dare would recover now, and he was childishly delighted about the outcome of the whole thing. But Buckskin Bob was worried. Bob knew that Bernice didn't love Dare, but he wasn't so sure about Dare's feelings. Bob had fallen for a woman at last. He was in love with Bernice Sibley, but how could he ask her to marry him if his own brother was in love with her?

And then there was Kate. She had been a good friend. He knew he could never marry Kate, but he hated to hurt her feelings.

He decided that the best thing he could do, as soon as Doc gave permission, was to go back into the mountains for another six months. He intended to give his interest in the Lost Soldier to Bernice anyway. He would see Doc.

As he started to leave the house Kate called him. "Look, son," she said, "you'd ought to be happy instead of wearing that long face. You and Bernice are in love with each other. Any fool can see it. She's in the parlor. Why don't you go and talk to her?

She's a wonderful girl."

"What about Dare?" he asked. "I couldn't have him thinking I'd tried to cut him out."

KATE smiled tenderly. "I told him this morning that you and Bernice were in love with each other. Want to know what he said?"

"What?"

"He said, 'Hurrah! Now that old goat of a brother of mine will have to stay home and run the darn ranch, and I can get away and have some fun.'"

"He said that?"

"He most certainly did. You go thataway to reach the parlor." Kate smiled again and was gone.

After a minute Bob turned and opened the parlor door. Bernice was looking at some music on Kate's piano, but she didn't seem to mind laying it down. She came slowly to meet him, and her eyes were soft and tender. Bob raised first one and then the other of her still sore hands to his lips. They signified to him the kind of courage and loyalty that would never fail.

"My father told me what kind of a man you were," she said softly. "I knew I was going to fall in love with you."

"Life would have been plain hades if you hadn't," he told her earnestly.

FOR LEASE—WATER RIGHTS IN HELL!

By RALPH BERARD

Clay Masin's gun was a fast and unerring piece of machinery. Clay Masin had used that gun to subjugate all of Green Grass Valley . . .

At the porch they came to a dead stop—for a gruesome sight met their eyes!

THE morning sun of early July shown pleasantly. Tad Rosslyn didn't want trouble. He would have done anything reasonable to avoid it but he stood holding the bridle-strap of his little tan mare, Nell; he saw Clay Masin come riding down Flamingo Creek toward him, and he knew that trouble was seeking him.

Clay Masin rode up leisurely, whistling without any tune and purely for affect as Tad well knew. When he was near enough Masin stopped whistling. He drew up his horse and cleared his throat. "Good morning, lad," he said condescendingly.

Tad said, "Good morning." He was thinking what a poor job Masin made of trying to fit himself in with anything good. The big rancher was about thirty-five, a little bigger than an active man should be about the middle at that

age, with a face reddened by continuous use of alcohol. Masin's grey eyes were a trifle watery, an occasional glint of cruel selfishness showing in them. Only the big sixgun on his right hip lent him any appearance of real sturdiness and it was this sixgun which had subjugated all Green Grass Valley. In spite of the man's otherwise flabby and even somewhat unsubstantial stature, his gun was a fast and unerring piece of machinery which Tad felt sure, but could not prove, had already taken the life of more than one of his father's best friends and neighbors.

"Your father home?" Masin asked in a surface tone of friendliness which only raised a deeper disgust inside of Tad.

"Dad isn't well," Tad said. "He's authorized me to attend any business. Doc Reynolds says any sudden shock or excitement might finish his heart."

"I reckon your mother, then, would have the say about selling the place."

Tad felt his teeth and his fists both clench involuntarily because of Masin's derogatory tone. Today was Tad's twenty-second birthday. He was tall and lean, even handsome, with his black hair and sharp flashing eyes. He carried a gun, too, and could use it. He resented Clay Masin's attempt to treat him as a child. It was true that Doc Reynolds had finally convinced Jard Rosslyn that his active days were over and that Tad's father had given his son full authority, even to the drawing of a legal power-of-attorney. The one determination to hold onto the tiny strip of land they held on Flamingo Creek had become a ruling passion of both father and son. Tad saw the little piece of land as the only means of making his mother's old age secure and of guaranteeing his sister Kate's future. He said, "You know the TJR isn't for sale, Masin. If you're determined to drive us off at gun point, why don't you just go ahead without all the rotten formality of offering to buy at some ridiculous low price?"

Masin's watery eyes opened wider and he straightened somewhat in the saddle. It was plain enough he had not anticipated any such quiet but firm denunciation from the firm-lipped lad. He blustered, "Are you trying to insinuate . . . are you trying to accuse me of . . .?"

"I wouldn't take the trouble," Tad replied in a tone of disgusted sarcasm. "Make your proposition, Masin; I'll listen." Tad's tone was provokingly weary. He leaned against his meek little pony's shoulder as if Clay Masin were little more than a troublesome blowfly, interfering with Tad's enjoyment of the bright morning sunshine.

Masin stood a moment, narrow-eyed and ominous-postured. Tad could guess he was refraining from the dangerous course of shooting Tad on the spot and slowly deciding on the more sensible course of diplomacy. When he spoke again it was in an unusually soft and friendly tone, almost pleading. "You can't run enough cows on such a small spread to make any money," he reasoned.

"No," Tad agreed. "But so long as we hold five hundred feet of Flamingo Creek we can water ten thousand head of cattle every summer. We can throw our little range open to all the ranchers that haven't got water and they're all mighty glad to pay a reasonable fee for watering rights. Those fees would protect my mother and sister from want even if we never ran a head of our own cattle."

Tad took his weight off the pony's shoulder and stood straight, facing the man who was determined to become outright master of Green Grass Valley, unafraid, even defiantly. "You've managed, by foul means or fair, to get control of the entire creek except our stretch and you know that if you get that, you'll not only control the TJR

but you'll have every other rancher in Green Grass Valley by the neck. You're the kind of a pig who doesn't want anyone to live but yourself."

Masin's eyes hardened. His fingers curled nervously and Tad could see his lips twitching. "Repeat them words, you young whipper-snapper and I'll . . ."

TAD put up both hands, leaned them across his pony's back and laid his head over against them. "I learned something from my dad," he said quietly. "You can't lure me into a gun fight at this stage of the game, Masin. If you want to murder me, go ahead and shoot; it's perhaps the only game you're good at. I've seen enough of it since I was sixteen or seventeen to know you and your hirelings have got the most guns, that you shoot the fastest, and that you're determined to run things your own way. You already control the sheriff and the law but you can't provoke me into drawing a gun." Tad laid his head down lazily above the horse's flank. His voice was a slow contemptuous drawl. "When the right time comes, Masin, I'll drag my shooting iron with you and I'll kill you." Tad climbed up into the saddle, his back toward the irate rancher. He rode toward the house without looking back.

At the porch Gauky Bryan stood talking with young George Sims whose horse stood nearby. Gauky was short and stalky, loyal as punchers ever came and unusually handy with a shooting iron. He had been foreman of the TJR when Tad's father had owned more land and had run a big herd. He was the only puncher who had stayed with them through all the years of adversity and now he was grinning broadly and bantering their neighbor, George Sims, about having such a case on Tad's sister, Kate. "Now, when I was young," Gauky was saying, "we did our courtin' by moonlight under a spreadin' chestnut tree."

"Were you afraid to be seen in daylight?" George asked laughing.

Kate was standing on the porch. She was a year younger than Tad and just rounding into pink-cheeked, blue-eyed beautiful womanhood. Gauky turned appealingly to the girl, "You can stand to look at me in daylight, can't you, Miss Rosslyn.

"I enjoy looking at you any time," the girl laughed. "You're so funny."

Gauky turned his attention to Tad just sliding off his horse. "You don't look so happy," he said soberly.

"I'm not," Ted admitted. "I reckon I won't be till we're rid of Clay Masin one way or another. He was just trying to frighten me into selling the TJR again."

Gauky's right hand yanked forth his sixgun. "Boss," he pleaded, "I wish you'd let me shoot that hombre, just one time."

George Sims had come forward. He was Tad's own age. His face was serious now. "Is there . . . is there any danger that we won't be able to get water, Tad . . . I mean is there a chance you might sell to Masin? Dad's been worried. He was talking about it just the other night." George shifted the big gun that hung on his youthful hip. "It looks to me like we're fighting a hopeless fight. Masin'll get us all in the end."

"Not if I can prevent it," Tad said firmly. He walked across the porch and looked back before entering the house. "Tell your dad, George, that he can have water from the TJR as long as water runs in the creek. I'm not selling and the creek's never gone dry yet."

Young Sims' face remained serious however. "This looks like it's stacking up for the hottest summer we've ever had," he prophesied. "In another month every critter in the valley will have its tongue hanging out."

Tad went inside. He found his fa-

ther sitting in the big wheel-chair, told him briefly what had happened, then was immediately sorry. "It don't bode no good, lad," Jard Rosslyn proclaimed excitedly. "It don't bode no good. It'll end up in gunsmoke one way or another and men'll be killed."

"There," Tad said comfortingly. "Take it easy, dad. Clay Masin isn't going to lure me into no gun play."

"Then he'll find a way to shove us off our land; he'll just push us off."

Tad fell thoughtful. In a pinch he could likely raise half a dozen good men in the valley, men who would fight to the last drop of blood to protect the few measly little spreads that were left. There was George Sims and his father, good old reliable Jake Sims, who had never failed in any pinch yet. There were the Dobson Brothers of the PQ and old Fred Solduc and his son, Jimmy.

Against those six, all of whom were either too young or too old to be at their best, Clay Masin had at least thirty gun-slinging cowhands and outright hired gunmen. These were no odds that would lend any comfort. Tad took a deep breath. "I'll find some way, Dad, to beat Masin at his own game."

But Tad left his father's room with no knowledge of how to proceed. The best he could think to do was let Clay Masin take the first move, the . . . His mother came up to him smiling bravely as she always did. Martha never spoke of unpleasant things. "Dinner's ready, Tad." She called to Kate and George Sims and Gauky. "Come in; all of you. Lunch is being served." Gauky came in with the others, a little backward and reticent. It seemed the trusted foreman could never get used to eating in the house and being one of the family. But Tad knew that likely Gauky Bryan was going to be the most needed one of them all because of his gun and the way he could use it.

George Sims' prophesy proved right about the weather. July drifted into August on a trail of heat and dust and draught. The Dobson Brothers began driving cattle to Rosslyn's stretch of Flamingo Creek first. Soon Sims' cattle and Solduc's 2S beasts were among the others.

THE evening of the tenth of August a lone cowboy rode up to the TJR. Dinner was over. Tad had rolled his father's chair into his bedroom. Both Kate and Tad's mother were outside trying to cool off. The tramp cowhand materialized out of the sunset in an orange-red ball of swirling dust. He dismounted near where they sat, a thin, emaciated looking fellow of mostly skin and bones and a great gun hanging low from a badly scuffed belt. "You folks got a bunkhouse where a man could catch a few winks of sleep." The fellow doffed his hat politely, stood twirling it a bit awkwardly.

Tad stepped to the edge of the porch, appraised the stranger thoughtfully before speaking. "Ride far?"

"Quite considerable distance.. Been in the saddle three days now, headin' for Montana."

"Quite a trip," Tad considered. "Not on the prod from the law, are you?"

The fellow seemed to think this was humorous. "On the prod from the lawless," he advised. "Name's Frank Ludlow; maybe if you'd put me up with grub and a bed I could make it right more ways than one."

Tad again considered thoughtfully. He liked the cut of Frank Ludlow's jib. He requested his sister to bring a plate of victuals, then sat down beside the cowboy on the step. "What did you mean by the crack about running from the lawless?"

Ludlow wolfed a sandwich. "Ever hear tell of Todd Lynch?"

"The rustler?"

"He's outdoing himself this season,"

Ludlow said. "He's driving the greatest herd of cattle north since the days of Dodge City and the big Texas drives." Ludlow seemed to momentarily lose his appetite. "Lost my best friend. One of Lynch's outlaws shot him dead. There's damn little law left any place in the Southwest. Times was so damn tough most all the ranchers got to fighting among themselves over water or one thing or another. Lynch seemed to realize that a well organized band of owlhooters could gather plenty of good riders and practically sweep the country clean of what beef was left. They could fight their way to water and sell at a good price at railhead just because of things being so tough for every legitimate rancher."

"They could fight their way to water, eh?" Tad said the words very slowly. "You reckon Lynch will come this way? If so how soon?"

"He'll likely make his drive east of the Cranberry Hills," Ludlow thought. "Maybe in about two weeks. Coming this side of the hills would take a week longer."

"Not much water the other side of the Cranberries," Tad said.

A bitter smile crossed Ludlow's seamed features as he finished the last sandwich. "I hope every last critter he's drivin' drops in its tracks," he muttered. Then he shrugged and rose. "Thanks a lot for the hand-out. I'm not flush with money but thought maybe the tip about Todd Lynch might be worth something. You want to gamble a bed for me?"

"Come on," Tad motioned. He led the puncher and his horse toward the bunkhouse. "It hasn't been used much lately," he apologized, "but I reckon you won't freeze this weather. There's plenty of straw and blankets for a soft bed."

Ludlow smiled his appreciation. Tad forked down hay for the horse. "You're not exaggerating about Lynch?"

"Hell, no; I'm understating it. He's driving several thousand head and gathering more every night from any place he can steal them. There's not a sheriff in the country can raise half enough men to stop him."

"You wouldn't want to stay here and maybe . . . maybe fight?" Tad suggested.

Ludlow shook his head with a weary smile. "I'm going to Montana, brother. They tell me it rains there, sometimes more than one time in a year."

Tad said slowly, "We'll have breakfast at six. Come on over to the house and eat with the family; I'll have Sis pack you a lunch."

But things were to happen before Tad Rosslyn ate breakfast again. He was awakened about midnight by some sound at first indefinable. It was very faint, far away. Tad sat upright in bed. He remained very still a long time, listening. The sound seemed to gradually work closer and finally Tad knew what it was.

He leaped from bed, put on his clothes, strapped his gun belt about him and dashed from the bedroom. In the big beamed living room he met Kate in her night dress. The girl was not frightened. She carried a candle and there was a puzzled look on her pretty face. She brushed loose hair aside from her forehead and smiled quizzically. Tad was proud of what a lovely sister he had.

"What is it, Tad; what's the noise, that low rumble?"

"Cattle," Tad said grimly.

"You mean one of the ranchers is driving cattle to water this time of night?"

"I mean Clay Masin's turned hundreds of head of his stock into our very dooryard. Unless I'm a mighty bad guesser it's his way of taking our land."

THEY went to the door, out upon the porch. There was a murky moon.

The bunkhouse and big hay barn stood out like prehistoric monsters of hazy blackness. A tall slender figure was coming toward the house from the bunkhouse. This was a man, Frank Ludlow, who had been sleeping there. Other figures began to appear, slow-moving cattle lumbering about aimlessly.

Kate ran to get into some clothes. Ludlow tied his horse at the porch and came up as Tad stepped outside. "Somebody's let down your fence some place. There's cattle all over the place."

"Yeah," Tad offered no further immediate explanation. Gauky Bryan had heard the disturbance and now appeared on the porch beside them. Tad introduced Ludlow. He added, "This looks like Masin's play, Gauky. He aims to let his critters overrun the place. If we were to drive them off, he'd open the fences another night. Finally he'd force a fight."

Gauky scratched his head a second, then hitched his big gun into place. "It might as well be now, Boss. I can't never die no younger.

Tad laid a restraining hand on the enthusiastic ex-foreman's shoulder. Turning to Ludlow he explained the situation briefly. "You might as well ride on," he suggested. "Things are going to be in turmoil here, maybe it won't be a pleasant place to eat breakfast."

Ludlow glanced around at his horse, drew his gun thoughtfully and spun the cylinder idly. "I reckon you treated me pretty well, my friend. If I'm still welcome I'll stay. I've earned my keep with powdersmoke before. I'd a lot rather be fighting Lynch but if you say his name is Masin, let's gun the man down."

Tad felt a thrill of pride in the loyalty of these two men. "It isn't quite that easy," he said. "Clay Masin's got a good thirty men to back him up." He fell thoughtful a moment, then said to Ludlow, "It might be possible you could still save your bullets for Lynch . . . it might work out that way . . . stranger things have happened."

Both Gauky and Ludlow gave him pointed looks of inquiry but Tad offered no explanation. Tad wasn't sure there was any explanation. He said, "I think we'll let the cattle stay; we can't fight Clay Masin, not with any chance of success, not yet."

Gauky grumbled at this decision. "Things won't get better by themselves," he claimed somewhat belligerently. "Your dad wouldn't put up with this."

"That's what bothers me most," Tad said. The three went inside. A little dawn light came peaking in the windows. Kate came in fully dressed and Tad's mother also appeared. The two women prepared breakfast amid a heavy silence. Tad paced the floor. Finally he went to his father's room and was immediately sorry he had not come sooner.

Jard Rosslyn was in a serious state. He had dressed in his chair and was wheeling it toward the door when Tad entered. "The dam sidewinder's plannin' on running us out of our own home." Jard Rosslyn had been out of his chair and had got hold of his big sixgun. Tad caught sight of the weapon's butt tucked down at the old grey-haired rancher's right side. Jard was gesticulating with both hands, his face looked pale and drawn.

Tad took hold of the chair. "We'll take care of him, Dad." He tried to comfort his father, wheeled him into the kitchen, introduced Frank Ludlow and made every effort to get his father's mind at ease. The strain of the night's excitement was plainly visibly on his parent's face and Tad was more terrified at the thought of a sudden heart attack than he would have been by Clay Masin's guns.

After breakfast he wheeled his father onto the porch. The move was not des-

tined to bring much happiness, however. The cattle, roaming restlessly about, added to Jard's uncontrollable anger. "Everything'll be torn all to hell," the old fellow moaned. "I could kill Clay Masin with my bare hands."

Tad could tell that both Gauky's and Frank Ludlow's sympathies were with his father. His own caution, however, was a deep-rooted thing that might well be mistaken for cowardice which did not exist. "I'll handle this," he said resolutely.

Tad had hardly said that when hoofbeats sounded out past the corral. A full dozen riders came up at a canter. Clay Masin was leading them. Beside him rode Jess Katby, one of the most cruel and heartless of Masin's killers.

Gauky's hand went to his gun. Frank Ludlow tensed, looked toward Tad as if for instructions.

Tad stepped forward, his eyes hard, his chin set in a firm, stubborn line. With slow deliberation he lifted his gun from leather and tossed it to the far end of the porch. "Give me your gun, Gauky."

Gauky's mouth opened in disbelief. "To hell I . . ."

"Give me your gun, Gauky." There was that in Tad Rosslyn's eyes that no man had ever seen there before. It was no longer a lad who stood here. This was a man, a man full grown, capable of giving orders, and demanding obedience. Gauky surrendered his gun hesitatingly, almost with pleading in his eyes. It clattered on the floor near Tad's.

Tad took another step forward. "And yours, Ludlow."

Ludlow had less excuse to refuse. It wasn't his fight in the first place. He surrendered his weapon with a little twist, butt first, an incredible smile twisting his pinched, thin mouth. "You're the coolest hombre I ever seen," he remarked There was a shade of doubt and questioning in his tone, "But I think you're loco."

ACTUALLY anger was boiling inside Tad Rosslyn, belying the calm mask of his face. Maybe that was why he forgot the big sixgun tucked beside his father's wheel chair.

Clay Masin had watched the process of taking the guns with a tight frown. Now he dismounted at the porch steps. Jess Katby stepped down beside him, an insolent sneer on his scarred face, his hand near a gun.

Masin's assumed politeness was as evident now as when he had accosted Tad previously. "These cattle about your door-yard are bound to become a nuisance," he advised suavely. "There don't seem to be any way we can keep them out of . . ."

Jard Rosslyn suddenly tossed back the robe that had been tucked about him in the wheel chair. Tad leaped forward as he saw his father rise.

It was too late. Jard cried out, "If it's the last act of my life, Clay Masin, I'll kill . . ."

The big sixgun was coming into line. Masin's hand streaked for his gun. Katby would have drawn in one more second.

But Jard's anger-filled words died in his throat. A convulsive contraction of the throat jarred his head back. With a crumpling twist his body fell forward. The hand holding the gun came down on the porch with a crash. The weapon was discharged harmlessly by the pull of a dead man's trigger finger. Jard Rosslyn's heart had failed him in his last desperate effort.

Tad kneeled on the porch by his father's form. He looked at the wide, still-open, desperate eyes, and inside of him was born a hate and determination for vengeance so great that it made him calm. He thought of his gun lying there on the porch and he knew the human and natural thing was to dash there, to grab it, to kill Clay Masin or

to be killed and to do it now. But he was conscious also of Kate kneeling beside him. He heard the deep-throated sobs which came from his mother. Turning, he saw Gauky Bryan, standing helplessly wordless. Tad rose. He moved forward one step to the edge of the porch and faced Clay Masin. His voice was not raised above the tone of ordinary conversation when he said: "I will kill you, Masin. It is a promise you may depend upon."

Tad turned away, then, not noticing that Clay Masin's face had paled in spite of him, not seeing his enemy's fingers twitch near his gun handle. Tad was playing his game even better than he knew. He had Masin helpless because there were women here, people even Masin dared not kill and they would have been witnesses had murder been done.

The following day Jard Rosslyn was laid to final rest in the little Dry Springs cemetery. The town's old sky-pilot spoke the brief requiem and as if in reverence for this old pioneer's good works a single cloud passed across the sun while Tad stood bareheaded in the cemetery with his mourning mother and sister. The parched earth was briefly cooled by its shadow. Tad took it as a good omen.

Old Jake Sims and his son, George, were at the funeral. The few little ranchers who still held out in the valley all were there. When the brief service was over they gathered around Tad.

Tad looked around at the little circle. He was a man none of them had ever seen before. His eyes were cold, his movements precise. It seemed his brain had become a mechanical thing, like a clock which ticked off the minutes of destiny, each thing that was to happen, preordained, and in its properly planned place. He saw the ready weapons they had brought. He read in their eyes how anxious they were to have this thing over with.

Tad looked at them and answered what was in their eyes. "We will not go and get ourselves killed uselessly," he said. "There is a better way. I am not quite certain but I think I know that way."

"Our cattle have to have water," one of the Bobson boys said. "Masin's got possession of all the creek now and he won't let them drink."

Tad said, "Drive your cattle down there. Go without weapons. Your cattle will mingle with his and he will let them drink. He will think that later he can claim them all. But before then we shall try and get them separated again." Tad raised his face and looked at the sky. The cloud passed over the sun and seemed to dissolve in space. "I have a plan," he said. "Pray God it does not rain."

THE simple ranchers followed Tad as if he had become their Messiah. It was not perhaps so much that they had confidence in him as that there was nothing else they could cling to. Tad seemed to have a plan. Whatever it could be was better than nothing. And Tad would not tell them his plan because he knew that these men must have a leader, that, in spite of his youth, they looked to him and he must not fail them. They were sensible enough to realize that an open attack upon Masin could result only in failure and death to most of them. He knew also that his own plan was a matter of great chance but . . . he glanced again at the sky . . . if it only wouldn't rain for another ten days.

Tad singled out Jake Sims. He chose Sims because the old man had been one of his father's closest friends as well as because of the relationship between Kate and George. "Mom and Sis can't very well live in the house with cattle running around like they are," he said, "I wonder if. . . ."

Old man Sims understood. Eagerly he invited, "You bet your life, lad; bring your mother and Kate right on over, and come yourself, too."

Tad thanked him with a brief smile. "I'll be pretty busy," he said. "I want you and George to come with me tonight. Strap a sack of oats to your horse and bring canteens for water. We'll meet in front of the livery barn at six." He turned to the others, "I'll want you two Dobson boys, and you Solduc, and you, too, Jimmy; you know how to handle a gun."

There was no need of words with Gauky or Ludlow. These two showed eager, beaming faces. Gauky said, "Action, huh, Boss? Gad, how I been waiting."

Ludlow said, "I thought I was through with fightin' but when I see people stickin' together like you folks do, it puts something in the blood." He grinned. "I'm goin' to be a bigger help than you think. I'm skinny as hell, damn hard to hit."

Tad said, "Before we separate to prepare for tonight I wish you'd all ride along with me over to the sheriff's office. I got a word to say to Fret Ormsbit."

Dry Springs wasn't much of a town. Besides the livery stable, there was Jason's General Store, the Holiday Saloon, Mike Friday's hotel and Orscet's horseshoeing shack. The entire place was so dust-covered and quiet that it looked like a good puff of sudden wind would blow it away.

Tad rode in front of his men down the little hill from the cemetery and they drew up in front of Fret Ormsbit's home, which Masin's henchman sheriff also considered his office. The lawman was home, as like as not, because Masin had instructed him to keep an eye on what happened at the funeral. He came to the door when Tad knocked, blinked a moment against the intense heat of the sun, then seeing so many riders, began to look worried.

Tad made his message brief. "You represent the law in Dry Springs, don't you, Ormsbit?"

Ormsbit was a short, fat man. His eyes were colorless and he had little rounded red cheeks with a schoolboy complexion. He ran his finger nervously about his loose shirt collar. "Well, I reckon I do, what there is of it."

"Clay Masin," Tad announced briefly, "has let his cattle loose on my property. I've asked him to get the critters off and he don't do it. All these men with me have contracts to water their stock on my property and I'm instructing them to drive their critters down for water." Tad paused to let a few of these thoughts sink in, then he added with a fatalistic lack of inflection in his tone, "There aren't many trees in this country, sheriff, but if you don't get Masin's cattle off my property and see that he doesn't take any of these honest men's critters with them, we're going to find a tree, we're going to hang you to one of the highest limbs by the neck, then we're going to elect an honest man in your place."

A gurgle of laughter came from the men behind Tad. They had been spoiling for action. It was surprising how the call on Ormsbit raised their confidence.

Tad stood a moment longer looking at the weakling before him. He couldn't resist adding, "A hell of a sheriff, you are. When Clay Masin barks you put your tail between your legs." Ormsbit looked like that, a cur with its tail between its legs.

Tad turned on his heel and left. The interview had been a ludicrous affair but it had a purpose behind it.

AT SIX that night they met behind the livery barn. If Clay Masin had spies watching in the town, they learned little. These men met silently,

each serious-faced, tight-lipped. There was a sack of oats tied to each rider's saddle. The party carried as much water and food as could well be taken.

Tad Rosslyn rode in the lead. At his left side Gauky Bryan supported him. To the right rode Frank Ludlow.

Tad had spent an hour that afternoon alone with Ludlow. At first the thin stranger had scoffed at Tad's scheme, had called it foolhardy, and refused to co-operate with any sort of rustling operation. Tad's expression had not changed, his voice had not risen. "All right, Ludlow," he had said quietly. "You ride on north, then. There'll be eight good men without you."

"Be damned," Ludlow had said. He had looked at Tad's calm, determined face and repeated, "Be damned." Then he had filled his canteens at the TJR's cool spring of water and mounted saying, "Let's be riding, partner, and if you ever catch me kickin' over the traces again, you got permission to wrap my chaps around my neck and sprinkle my tail with salt."

Tad had smiled briefly. They had mounted, picked up Gauky and ridden past two of Clay Masin's trouble-hunting punchers without so much as a nod.

Now they rode into the cooling shadows of evening, nine riders armed with the fire of determination and an intense desire for vengeance. And three of them were only boys.

Gradually the trail led upward. They did not hurry. With slow, steady progress they climbed the first low slope of the Cranberries. Brief, discouraged-looking patches of dry scrub clung to the higher ridges. The moon got up, its face red and sunburned with hot dust. It laughed at them and they rode on. Slow, weary, waterless step after draught - bleached step the winded horses were urged into the cleaner air of the higher Cranberry slopes. At midnight they stopped, tossed blankets upon the hard earth and slept.

They went on with the first light. As the sun tipped over the rim of the vast Umhauby Basin east of the Cranberries, Tad called a halt. He sat his horse between Gauky's and Ludlow's. All three looked a long time out over the dry expanse of arid wasteland, letting their eyes drift slowly from south to north and back to south. But there was no living thing to see.

They rode on.

Intense heat came. It baked their faces and exhausted their horses. Each man knew that death now walked the earth beside him, that this was a death with a fiery tongue and a searing breath. They turned in a more southerly direction and rode on.

The second night lent the blessedness of a slight coolness because of the altitude. Just before dark Gauky Bryan cried out in a cracked voice, "Water."

The horses were already aware of it. They increased their pace without urging. The water was a brackish remainder of winter snows. It was in a deep cut where giant boulders shaded it and the horses had to be ridden down one at a time to drink. The men dared not use it. They revived themselves sparingly from their carefully hoarded supply while the animals they rode exhausted the small supply in the gully. They even licked up the mud beneath and pawed their hoofs into the slight coolness. The men made camp and rested.

When Tad awoke, daylight had partly come. He heard someone shouting, then he saw Frank Ludlow running toward him from a slight eminence where the cowboy had gone to look out over the prairie. Ludlow was so excited Tad feared for a moment the man was mad.

"They're coming; they're coming," the skinny puncher repeated again and

again, "Damned if they ain't coming . . . the loco fools."

"Many men go loco for money," Tad said quietly. "I thought they would come."

The entire party had become aroused. They went in a body to the high spot overlooking the lower Umhauby Basin. What they saw seemed at first like a little trail of distant smoke. It moved. It seemed blunt-headed and darker in front, trailing toward the rear, disappearing finally in trailing brown mist. Todd Lynch was trying to cross the basin east of the Cranberries in the dryest weather Tad had ever known. Already the cattle were straggling. The long-drawn-out trail behind the vast moving caravan told him cattle were already dying.

No words were spoken. These determined men went back and mounted their horses, pulled them to bit and moved forward. They headed northeast down the east slope of the Cranberries toward the most advantageous point to meet Todd Lynch and his desperate riders.

At high noon the party stopped. Tad got down from his horse and stood in its meagre shadow, waiting for the horsemen who had detached themselves from Lynch's party and were coming toward them. Gauky stayed on his horse. Ludlow slid off and stood beside Tad.

A DOZEN men rose up slowly. Their horses looked incapable of faster movements. The beasts' heads were down, their mouths open, sparse saliva drying on their foam-flecked lips. It was not hard to recognize Todd Lynch. Of all his hard-bitten riders, he seemed the biggest, the brownest, the most burned and leathery. There was still an ominous flash in his black eyes and the beautiful guns about his hips were not to be disregarded just because the man was tired. He drew his horse up and raised his hand to halt those who rode with him. "You hombres wants something?" Lynch's cold appraisal indicated he thought little enough of the little group of old men and boys who had ridden out like this to challenge him.

"We thought maybe you would want something," Tad suggested. There was no suggestion of violence or unfriendliness in his tone.

There was a brief silence. Lynch was plainly enough at a loss. "What would I want?"

"Water."

"Water! Water!" Todd Lynch laughed loudly, a bit unsteadily. Even the hardest man will quaver when he knows all he has gambled to win hangs upon the thickness of his tongue. The outlaw was unable to prevent his inner desperation from being mirrored in his tone. "Do you gentlemen cause the rain to fall, or did you bring it in a bucket?"

"We have running water in a little gurgling stream," Tad said almost musically. "It is a little stream that tinkles and bubbles down from yonder snow and it will water ten thousand head." He pointed toward far away Cranberry Peak still dimly snow-peaked in the midst of the distant sun."

Again the outlaw was silent. The men with him looked at each other. They were a hard-bitten lot, dirty, tired, unshaven, every one of them killers and likely not one of them but would have traded his gun and cartridge belt at that moment for a canteenful of cool, pure water. "I haven't time for joking," Lynch snapped. "Make your proposition; my cattle are dying."

"They will all die," Tad said. "Every head. I know this country, Lynch. You don't. You will not find one drop of water for three days. By then you'll have nothing to sell but bones for fertilizer."

"Make your talk and make it sensi-

ble," the rustler roared.

Tad made his talk. "My men and I can guide your entire herd across the Cranberries. I own water rights where you can water and feed flesh back on their bones. Thirty days delay will only make you a better market at railhead."

"There has to be a catch someplace," Lynch growled.

"There is," Tad admitted matter-of-factly. "Another thieving hombre moved in on my water rights. There's not enough of us to drive off his thirty or so gun-slingers and this hombre aims to stay permanent. The simple fact is that we'd rather entertain the worst owlhooter this side of the Pecos royally for thirty days than give up a creek that never goes dry without chance of getting it back."

They made more talk. Finally Lynch said, "How do I know this ain't a trap. Maybe you got the law waiting over the Cranberries."

"We represent what law is over there and you'll never find a tighter trap than the one you're in right now."

Lynch considered a moment longer. "Your talk makes sense, stranger. I got about forty men. They're pretty tired and exhausted but they been fighting all the way. This looks like the only chance we got; we'll take it."

The decision made, Lynch and his men moved quickly. In an hour the long twisting train of famished cattle had turned westward. Stragglers still fell out behind. Beasts lay down and would not rise. But the setting sun found them on higher ground where a little coolness came. Another day's drive would bring them the sweet fresh smell of pure cold water. Nothing would stop them then, nothing would stand in their way.

Tad had made his plans carefully. Each of his men knew his given task. Tad, himself, rode ahead with Gauky. Frank Ludlow stayed with the others. Although Todd Lynch did not know it, it was Ludlow who had a score to settle with the rustler chief. For Lynch's men had killed Ludlow's saddle-mate in a raid.

Tad and Gauky rode into Dry Springs a full two hours before the cattle could reach the creek. They rode up to the sheriff's house and knocked. Fret Ormsbit came to the door, stark fear on his childish face. "Todd Lynch is riding into town," Tad told him briefly. "You better get word to your boss; we'll ride along."

They made Fred Ormsbit lead the way down the trail toward lower Flamingo Creek where Clay Masin's ranch buildings sprawled about the landscape like huge setting hens of different sizes. The sun had just set. A trifle of the hot sting of the day vanished with the last red glare and Tad forced Ormsbit to a slower pace. He wanted their arrival properly timed with Todd Lynch's wild herd of drink-crazed critters.

WHEN they rode up Clay Masin was sitting on the porch steps. A dozen or so of his men lolled about the ranchhouse yard. A little group was playing horseshoes near one of the corrals.

Tad and Gauky rode in with the sheriff from westward. There was still a glaring glow in the sky so that Masin heard the hoofbeats before he saw who it was. Tad instructed Ormsbit, "Better ride right up and tell your boss there's rustlers coming. They'll sure drive off his herds before this night is over."

Ormsbit rode slowly, ill at ease. Masin rose as the three horses drew close. Seeing who was riding behind his sheriff, he broke into a rather unsteady laugh. Perhaps he was wondering why Ormsbit would ride here with his enemies. Was it possible the sheriff had some foolish ideas of really enforcing

the law?

Fred Ormsbit had no such ideas. Much of the pink was gone from his fat schoolboy cheeks when his feet struck ground from his horse. Tad rode on up, then also dismounted. Gauky slid from his horse. The two TJR men stood holding their horses, waiting.

Ormsbit looked about him uncomfortably. Jess Katby rose beside his boss and hooked his thumbs in his gun belt. Nearly all of Masin's men, each man completely armed and ready for trouble, began slowly closing in on the little group. "Speak your piece," Tad poked the fat sheriff hard in the ribs with his finger.

Ormsbit glared a moment angrily. Turning to Masin, he burst out, "Rosslyn claims Todd Lynch is riding up the creek with his band of rustlers."

Tad remarked, "It's your duty to prevent rustling, sheriff. You got to protect Mister Masin's herd and the other cattle that's watering along my stretch of the creek."

Masin drew himself up haughtily. "I always been able to protect my own cattle, Rosslyn." There was a smirk on Masin's face, a cutting edge to his voice.

A shot sounded from the direction of the TJR. Masin turned, his face changing.

Tad said, "I suppose Lynch'll kill off the men you got riding day herd down on my place first."

More shots sounded. The gunfire grew quickly into a holocaust. Clay Masin's nervousness increased.

"You better send some men," Tad suggested quietly.

Jess Katby laid a firm hand on Masin's shoulder. "Don't do it; that's what he's playing for."

Tad sat down on the edge of the porch. "Lynch can't steal the creek. I'm not worrying about your cattle. Just suit yourself, men."

The sound of stampeding cattle reached them now. Shots were being fired in the air. The sound was coming closer. "Seems like Lynch is getting your critters out of my creek for me," Tad said.

Masin and Katby both realized something was really happening. From where they stood they could see cattle sweep over a little green knoll some five hundred yards distant, a brown surging mass. Riders appeared, urging on the frightened steers.

Masin swung around. "Get going, you men!" he shouted.

The men started mounting. They drew sixguns as they fed spurs to their horses. In only minutes the yard near the house was nearly deserted. Masin glanced toward Katby, he looked at Tad, took a step toward his horse, then stopped. Everyone was gone now but himself, Katby and a little beetle-browed Mexican who began moving closer to the porch like a hairy-legged tarantula.

Masin made another indecisive move toward his horse. The near sound of sixgun fire increased. Tad said, "You weren't figuring on running away, were you Masin? I promised to kill you; remember?"

Masin tensed. His black eyes flickered wide open, narrowed. This was incredible. Jess Katby squared himself around and Tad straightened into a statue of calm, eager readiness. Gauky reached out casually, took hold of Fred Ormsbit's gun and flipped it twenty yards away. "You might get hurt if you played with that," the squat little puncher grinned. "I gotta take care of Kitty and I can't be bothered with insects." Gauky's eyes settled on Jess Katby, an impatient glint of defiance flashing forth a challenge.

"Well," Tad challenged, "that gunfire's getting closer, Masin. You won't have no beef left to fight for if you don't draw soon."

It happened then. There was the flash of red evening glow on gun metal, the heavy pound of sixgun fire. Tad's gun came up with practiced ease. He felt the butt of the weapon pulsing against his hand like a giant pulsebeat. He was aware of a breath of wind in his hair, a bullet passing. Masin's ugly mouth opened and for one hideous instant his rotten, tobacco-eaten teeth stood forth prominently. Then his body was on the ground.

THE Mexican had lifted a gun from its holster. Gauky's weapon and Tad's both turned toward him. Jess Katby lay on the ground dead. Tad took it for granted Gauky had tended to it. The Mexican never fired. Neither did they kill him. He let his weapon fall and went to his knees in supplication, praying them not to kill him.

Tad and Gauky moved forward together. They tested the lifelessness of their victims with the toes of their boots. Gauky sighed deeply. "So long I have waited; so soon it is over, for what should I live any longer?" For a moment the comical little ex-foreman seemed a pathetic picture of distress, then he grinned broadly and holstered his gun with a gesture of pride.

Tad took a minute to look at Ormsbit. "You'll have the time between now and when we get around to finding a tree limb," he threatened, "to leave town. If you're seen here-abouts again, we'll stretch your neck a full six inches."

Gauky picked up Ormsbit's weapon and dropped it in his own pocket. The would-be sheriff got mounted and was gone before Tad and Gauky could get started toward the dying-out gunfire.

They rode fast down the trail toward the creek. The shooting ended as they came up to a small group of Todd Lynch's tired men. "We'll get you something to eat if there's anything left at the house," Tad told them. "If there isn't someone will ride into town." They rode together back toward the TJR. Tad pointed out the bunkhouse and told them to go there. The two parties separated and Tad rode with Gauky to the house.

At the porch they came to a dead stop. A gruesome sight met their eyes. Six dead men were stretched out there, a blanket over their bodies. Tad's pulse quickened. He knew there must be some price to pay. His hurried glance swept from one dead man's face to another's. Fred Solduc had paid with his life. The others were all Lynch's men.

They went on inside. George Sims was stretched out on a couch, a blood-stained cloth about his head. He was conscious, though, and grinned as Tad came in. "It ain't so bad, Tad," he said, "but sure wish Kate was here to nurse me."

"I'll take care of it," Tad smiled. Then he turned to more serious business.

Frank Ludlow was sitting in a big leather chair. The skinny cowboy had a gun in his hand. The muzzle was pointing straight at the heart of a man who sat in a smaller chair opposite. That man was the rustler chief, Todd Lynch. "Got him all right," Ludlow grinned at Tad. "It was a kind of a dirty trick. Me and him was fighting side by side right up till the minute Masin's men started to run. He looked mighty surprised when I stuck my gun in his ribs and took both of his."

Todd Lynch was a weary man but the fight had not gone out of him. He met Tad's steady appraisal a full minute before speaking. "A damn contemptible trick," the rustler stated flatly.

Tad said, "Your men killed Mister Ludlow's saddle-mate just because he tried to save his employer's cattle. What sort of trick would you call that, Lynch?"

"It wasn't like breaking an agreement," the outlaw flared back. "Part

of his pay was for protecting cattle. He got killed doing what he was paid to do."

Tad considered this and smiled. He stepped close to Lynch and ran his fingers around the man's chest and under his arms. "Ludlow got all your firearms, eh?"

"I never had to carry any hidden ones." Lynch's eyes glowed like coals.

Tad sat down. He was feeling a little reaction also. "Lynch," he said impressively, "we're going to shoot more than fair with you. You've helped us drive Clay Masin's men out of the valley. Masin himself is dead. It's none of my business where you got the cattle you're driving and I'm willing to water and feed the critters till they're in good shape for market. Us ranchers of Green Grass Valley owe you that.

"We're going to do better than that: Clay Masin was running a good-sized herd. We don't know how he built it up and we don't care. Some of his critters were stolen from ranchers here in the valley. We aim to keep half of his critters and divide them up among the small ranchers to even the score. We won't be responsible for the other half and if they're missing when you leave, we won't start the law on your trail because of those particular cattle. What happens on account of those you're already driving is none of our business."

THE little glints in Lynch's eyes had begun to dance. The man was beginning to see Tad's game but he still wasn't sure. "Why'd you take my guns then?" he demanded.

"You're a rustler." Tad said. "Your job is stealing cattle just like Ludlow's saddle-mate made his wages protecting them. We want you to call in your men one or two at a time and have them turn in their guns. In two or three weeks your critters will be fit for market again. Meantime, there's work here. There's a lot of fences to repair. We got to round up cattle and separate brands. You don't mind working for beans and beds and water and grass for your critters, do you, Lynch?"

Lynch sat silently, half smiling. Ludlow holstered his weapon.

"I guess," Lynch said, "you figured you had to do what you did."

"What would you have figured?" Tad asked.

Todd Lynch rose a bit wearily but he was laughing. It seemed like a genuine laugh and when he extended his hand Tad took it. There was some good someplace in this big outlaw.

By the next night Tad had made himself as comfortable and happy as possible in temporary quarters at Jake Sim's place. Kate was busy and happy taking care of George. George insisted on staying in bed an extra day, "Wouldn't want to catch cold in this gunwound," he laughed. Tad glanced at Kate and knew that wasn't the reason.

The work at the TJR kept him busy but he managed to find a little time to spend with his bereaved mother. One night nearly a month after the big fight, they walked together to the little cemetery on the hill above Dry Springs. The sun had not quite set. Its last rays were reaching far out to eastward over the prairie and there, crawling like an enormous snake, Todd Lynch's men and cattle were moving northward.

"Well, Mother," Tad said fondly, "it's all worked out."

Martha Rosslyn looked down at the grave of her husband, brushed aside a tear and smiled. "He'd be happy if he knew," she said.

Tad looked down at the little mound of earth. Unexpectedly something welled up inside of him, that great something he and his father had always had in common.

"Yes, Dad, we saved the creek," he said.

SIX-GUN REBEL'S SUDDEN SALVATION

By RAYMOND W. PORTER

Sam Tooney saw fear in the eyes of men who met him in the dust with greased six-guns, but Sam knew that their panicked eyes only mirrored the secret terror that gnawed his own soul!

DRAMATIC NOVELET

His fist shot out without any effort on his part, dropping the kid, however, like a pole-axed steer!

WITH a check for fifty-six hundred dollars in his pocket, Sam Tooney walked into the bank in Arroyo. He slapped the check down in front of the cashier. "Cash it!"

The cashier's eyes widened to the approximate size of his glasses. "You mean you want the *money?*"

"Heck, yes, I want the money!" bellowed Tooney. "The check's good, ain't it?"

"Y-yes, I suppose it is—"

"You know darn well it is; The Henderson Commission Company don't write no bum checks."

"Of course not. But—I don't know whether we have that much cash on hand. I—I'll see."

The cashier retreated toward the vault, but instead stepped quickly into the office of Clyde Stephens, the president. A moment later, Stephens appeared.

"Hello, Tooney!" he said, approaching with a guarded smile. "How'd you make out?" He was holding the check.

"You can see how I made out," grunted Tooney.

"Is this for everything?"

"I reckon it is," Tooney said sullenly. "For everything and everybody, except me. Once a year I get my hands on some money, and before I can buy a nickel cigar, everybody takes it away from me."

"Oh, I guess it's not that bad," Stephens placated. "Come into the office and we'll see how we stand."

Tooney followed him glumly, sat sprawled at his desk while he took out a promissory note and figured on the back of it. "Principal and interest to date amounts to thirty-seven hundred dollars and forty-two cents," the banker announced cheerfully.

Tooney groaned. "Lousy hi-jackers!"

"You were right-anxious to do business with us 'hi-jackers' this spring, I remember."

"But never again!" swore Tooney. "I'll never ask you for another cent. Take your cut and give me what I got comin'!"

"In cash?"

"In cash!"

Stephens shrugged, stamped the note paid and tossed it on the desk. Then he walked up front and told the cashier to give Tooney eighteen hundred and ninety-nine dollars and fifty-eight cents.

Tooney stuffed the money in his pocket, and strode from the bank. His resentment was rapidly disappearing. He couldn't hold a grudge for long, and he was glad to get the note at the bank paid. He had intended to pay it, he told himself righteously. He just wanted to see how it felt to have fifty-six hundred dollars in money all at once. He probably never would know.

But it felt mighty good to have eighteen hundred and ninety-nine dollars and fifty-eight cents. It felt mighty good indeed. Of course, he still had pay the grocery bill and it would be a whopper. He had to pay three months wages to his four cowhands. He had to pay the hardware, and the feed bill. He didn't know what it all amounted to, or whether he would have enough to pay it all or not. He didn't like to figure it up, for fear he wouldn't.

First, he would get a drink. It would ease the pain of having to part with all this money.

In front of the saloon, four cowpunchers sat quietly on a long wooden bench. Seeing them, Tooney halted abruptly. "What the devil you-all doin' here?"

"We 'lowed you'd be comin' in today," said one of the men. The expectant gleam in his eye was reflected down the line of faces.

"Afraid you wouldn't get your wages?"

"Aw, no!" The puncher's tone indicated that nothing had been farther from his thoughts. "We just finished up with that fencin', and we been workin' hard ever since you been gone, so we thought you wouldn't care if we took a half a day off—"

"I'll bet you been workin' hard!" Tooney said sarcastically. "If you done any work at all, it'll surprise me. All right. Here's your money."

He counted it out to them grudgingly, and then fingered his diminished roll. Glancing across the street toward the general store and thinking guiltily of the bill he owed there, he shouldered through the swinging doors. He had a right to *some* of his own money. He had a right to buy himself a drink.

ONE drink called for two, and by that time he was feeling more charitable toward his punchers, who had lined up beside him at the bar. So

he bought them all a drink.

"How was the market?" Bangs wanted to know.

Bangs bore the title of foreman, strictly through courtesy. There was no need of a foreman on the Tooney Ranch. In another year or so there would be no need of any cowpunchers.

"Rotten," said Tooney, although he had sold his cattle for more than he expected.

"Have any trouble on the way?" Bangs asked hopefully. Up until this year he had been taken along to help with the feeding and watering of the cattle on these yearly excursions to the market, but the shipment had been so small this time, Tooney was able to do the work himself.

There had been no trouble on the way. Tooney's troubles were all waiting for him at home. His wife, Ethel, would want to know why he had been so long getting back, and she would ply him with accusing questions, and his son, Corbin, would look at him like something the dogs had treed. Even his younger son, Tim, was getting old enough to oppose him, taking his mother's part in everything.

They would never know how close he had come to taking that fifty-six hundred dollars and clearing out. He wished that he had, now that he thought of going back home and facing them, beginning another year's struggle to raise another little bunch of cattle, and then to sell them to pay the debts he would have hanging over him then, as now.

It was a devil of a life. Only once a year was there any respite. Once a year he had a little money in his pocket. Once a year he could get pie-eyed and forget his misery.

"Hello, Mr. Tooney!"

The voice was coy, in a whiskey-hoarse sort of way. The smile was smeared on like the lipstick—wide and bright. The eyes had a ready-money gleam in them.

"Hi, Tricks."

She propped a bare arm upon the bar. "Have a nice trip?"

"Rotten."

She shook her hair, which showed various blonde shades, and laughed in a low, intimate whinny, "I'll bet!"

He turned on her fiercely. "You'll bet what?"

Her lip curled. "Little touchy, ain't you? Somebody must have rolled you up in the big city."

"A man's more apt to get rolled in this dump, if you ask me!"

"Oh, is that so!"

He tossed off another drink, made a wry face, and muttered. "What do you want to nag at me for? I get enough of that at home."

"Am I naggin' you? I just asked you if you had a good trip. And you bite my head off."

"All right. Forget it. Have a drink."

She sipped her whiskey, looking at him with measuring eyes. "If I was you, I wouldn't go home—till I get in a better humor."

This was intended only for him to hear, and he pretended not to hear it.

Bangs moved around to the side of the girl. "The next one's on me," he proffered.

"I never take but one," Tricks said, coldly, turning her back on him.

Bangs reddened, but his voice was still amiable. "That a new rule you just made up, Tricks?"

She ignored him and he went on. "Seems to me I've seen you take more'n one."

"Shut up!" she said. "Let me alone."

"What you so touchy about?" Bangs asked.

Tooney said, "You heard her. Let her alone."

Bangs and Tooney looked at each other over the girl's head.

"I know what you're tryin' to do,"

said Tooney. "I can take care of myself."

Bangs changed colors again. Now his face was a pale limestone. "You right shore you can?"

There was a tense silence. Tooney sneered, "Reckon Ethel sent you after me."

Bangs stepped around, facing him. "You're lower down than I thought you was. Talkin' about your wife like that. I don't know why she puts up with you—"

Tooney hit him. His fist shot out without any effort or bidding on his part, blasting at Bang's bony chin like something touched off by powder.

THE flash of fury that went through him was gone in an instant, burned up with the same explosive charge. Before Bangs had hit the floor, Tooney was sorry he had hit him. He liked the gangling kid, who usually minded his own business and who, in any event, was no match for him.

Mike Matlaf was cut out in much blockier proportions. Mike was bull-necked and scowling, a newcomer to the Tooney Ranch, and boasted of having been a professional wrestler. He and Bangs were old friends, and it was reasonable to suppose that Mike wouldn't let anybody slap his young friend around.

He made a dive at Tooney and tried to get a wrestling hold on him. Tooney crouched forward as if he were going to defend himself in a wrestling match, which he had no intention of doing. Close in, he let go with a right hand wallop that sent the ex-wrestler rolling across the floor in a grunt-and-groan contest with himself.

Tooney hardly expected Andy Drake and Carl Hatoff to join the ruckus. But he was wrong. They both rushed in. Andy was an old-timer, tall and tough; Carl was a tenderfoot with a lot of book learning and practically no brains. Tooney took a light jab in the face from Carl, ducked Andy's first wild swing, then grabbed the youngster and threw him in the old-timer's face.

This eliminated Carl, who expired with a sighing sound like a tired horse lying down to rest. It only made Andy mad, however. Tooney had to hit him twice. He was the only one that required a double dose of the stuff Tooney could dish out with either hand.

Tooney hoped one of them would pull a gun. Or all of them. There was a savage, nawing desire in him to destroy what he could not conquer. These men had worked for him, they had done his bidding, but they looked down on him. They hated him. Everybody hated him.

Why did everybody hate him—even his own wife, his own sons? Because he was a failure? Because he could beat any man with his fists or with his gun? They were afraid of him. That's why they hated him.

He could see the fear in the faces of these men, and he knew they were not ordinarily afraid. He had seen them fight other men, but this was the first time any of them had ever dared oppose him. They had ganged up, thinking no doubt that they could all lick him.

Now, they knew they couldn't. They seemed to be aghast at their own affrontery in starting a fight with him. They were like impetuous boys who had gone too far with a prank, and saw death looking them in the face.

Tooney despised them, not for their temerity or their fear, but for their hatred of him, a hatred that had often been revealed but never so clearly as in this attack on him.

"All right!" he said. "You started it. Let's see you finish it. Anybody. All of you!"

He knew they were not going to, and he raved. He cursed them, he cajoled, he poured his hot scorn upon them, but all the time he was writhing

under their silent and fearful condemnation. He could smash them with his hands, he could kill them, but he could never stamp out the slithering hostility, the cold contempt, the aloofness with which everybody treated him.

He leaned back against the bar, panting in helpless wrath. His groping fingers fastened upon the tall round whiskey bottle, a quart half full. He lifted it and drank it all.

Nobody moved. They watched him as if they were expecting the liquor to down him. They should have known better. They had seen him drink it by the quart, and they had never seen him down.

"Come up here and drink!" he shouted.

They only stared.

He threw the empty bottle at Bangs, who ducked. The bottle smashed against the wall at his back and showered him with broken glass.

"Come up here, I say, and drink with me!" Tooney yelled.

They approached cautiously, and lined up along the bar as far away from him as possible.

"You too, Tricks!" he ordered.

The girl sidled forward. All of her bravado was gone, all of her coyness. she feared him too, hated him—like everybody else. Like the whole world.

"Drink!" he roared. "Drink! And hope it chokes you!"

AS A matter of fact, it did. The tenderfood coughed. Mike Matlaf gulped and snorted. Tricks lifted her glass, then set it down quickly and darted away.

"Come back here!" called Tooney.

The girl disappeared through a curtained doorway in the rear. Tooney started after her, then changed his mind. He turned back to the cowhands, plied them with liquor. The tenderfoot slumped to the floor after six drinks. Two rounds later, Mike Matlaf staggered toward the door and ignored Tooney shouts. Sounds of vomiting came from outside. Andy Drake turned pale, weaved toward a chair and collapsed in it. Bangs backed up cautiously and fell over his own feet.

Tooney had taken a drink each time he forced it on the others. He stood steadily, with feet well spread. He looked at Win Fargo, the bartender, and Fargo busied himself with polishing rag.

"Maybe *you'd* like to drink with me," said Tooney.

"Certainly," smirked Fargo.

The smirk irritated Tooney. "Never mind. I'd rather drink by myself."

Drinking by himself reminded him again of how lonely he was, and how everybody hated him. It reminded him that he would eventually have to go home and face his family.

"Why's it, Fargo," he asked plaintively, "everybody hates me?"

Fargo stammered,"I don't know—I mean—maybe they don't."

"You know darn well they do!"

In round ringing tones that filled the saloon with bell-like clearness, a voice said, "Why, you poor lost soul!"

Tooney jumped and swung around, facing the speaker. It was a woman—a large, round-faced woman with a mass of silvery curling hair beneath a bright red hat. She wore a tight-fitting dress and a shimmering cape, all white, which did little toward concealing her proportions.

"What the devil!" Tooney muttered. "How'd you get in here?"

He hadn't seen her enter. She had just materialized there beside him. It was enough to make him jittery.

"The devil had nothing to do with it, I assure you," said the enormous, white apparition. "I came from the Lord."

Tooney backed away from her and looked around cautiously. Maybe he was drunk, after all. Yet he had no

sensation of dizziness. And the vision persisted. He got flashes of it in the mirror across the bar, and the bartender too was staring.

"You say that everybody hates you, my friend?" the bell-like voice intoned. "And you want to know why? Maybe I can tell you."

"Huh."

"Do you love your fellow men?"

Seeing that she was real, seeing that he still had command of all his faculties, Tooney began to consider what she was saying. But he didn't understand it. She was batty. "What are you talkin' about?" he growled.

"Love of mankind. And you don't know what I'm talking about? Poor man. I see why everybody hates you. It's because you hate everybody. Isn't that so?"

"Who are you, anyhow?"

"I am Sister Friske. I am holding a revival meeting in Arroyo. I am bringing to you the love of God—and the love of man."

"You—you're a preacher?" gasped Tony.

"Yes, praise the Lord, I'm a preacher. And He sent me to the right place, I can see that."

She looked around the saloon, at the tenderfoot lying on the floor and at Bangs and at Andy sprawled drunkenly in chairs. She closed her eyes and turned her face upward. "Help me, Lord, to save these men. They are good men, but they have lost the way. Help them to find it. And help this poor man to understand that love rules the world, not hate . . ."

Tooney was fascinated, not only with what she was saying, but with the sound of her voice, with her statuesque beauty and her overflowing good will and friendliness. Although she had expressed pity for him, it was a professional sort of pity, and he did not resent it. She, of all the people in the world, showed no fear of him. She accepted him as a man, a good man who had lost his way.

He knew he had lost it. He knew he had been on the wrong trail for a long, long time. But how to get on the right one? In trying, he had become only more confused.

COULD this astonishing woman help him? A preacher. A woman preacher! How long had it been since he had seen a preacher? He had never seen a woman preacher before. He hadn't known there was such a thing.

This might have accounted to some extent for the curiosity he had about her, for the strange fascination she had for him. But he also recognized in her a power and a fearlessness that he admired. Above all other things he had worshipped strength and courage, and was proud of these qualities in himself. It was all he had to be proud of. He had flaunted it before everyone, he had made himself a man feared, but not admired. Not loved.

This woman talked of love. It had been years since he had heard the word. It was a word that a man had no use for. What did it mean? Certainly not what he had thought.

"My friends," she said in her ringing voice, "come out to the tabernacle tonight. Hear the word of God."

She moved away majestically.

"Where—where's it at?" Tooney asked.

"At the camp grounds down by the creek. The men are down there now putting up the tent. We are going to have a glorious time. Everybody come!"

Tooney went to church that night. He sat on a backless wooden bench, beneath a pressure gasoline light which sounded like bacon frying. An assortment of bugs surrounded the open flame, darting into it, and falling about his shoulders.

Sister Friske played on a tiny organ, over which she towered radiantly, singing in a powerful voice which swept all the faltering tones of her willing congregation into a grand burst of harmony.

You could sing as loud as you wanted to without fear of being noticed, or even heard. Tooney didnt know the words, but he learned a few under pressure of a continuous and stirring repetition: "Glory, glory, hallelujah, Glory, glory, hallelujah . . . Oh come, come, come, come . . . "

He had never sung songs like these before. They had in them something of the rollicking spirit of the bawdy ballads he had heard in saloons, and the haunting sadness of the songs of the range. And they had something more. They exalted him and at the same time made his feel that he was a part of this happy singing crowd of people. It was intoxicating—more so than all the liquor he had ever drunk.

When the singing was over and Sister Friske stepped forward and began to read from the Bible, he listened entranced. He didn't trouble to try to understand what she was reading, he just sat and absorbed it. And then they sang again, and Sister Friske exorted him to come forward and confess his sins.

He didn't feel sinful. He had nothing to confess. He felt that he had stumbled into a new world, a glorious place to be, and he wanted to stay right here the rest of his life. Dazedly, he went down the grassy aisle. Sister Friske came to meet him, took his hand with a powerful grip and led him to the altar—another bench like the ones the congregation sat upon. But here they knelt.

Tooney felt a little silly, kneeling down there by himself, but others began to come and kneel beside him. There was Ed Joiner, and Plummer's woman, and the little Conderoga girl. Tooney looked at them in silent wonder. He didn't know what had happened to them, they all looked so different. He didn't know what had happened to himself, either; but he found himself shaking hands with Joiner and Bud Crow and the Plummer woman, and he patted the little Conderoga girl on the head. She was not afraid of him. She put her hand in his. She liked him! The others liked him too. All the people there began to surge around him, slapping him on the back, shaking hands with him.

"Praise the Lord! . . . God bless you, b r o t h e r Tooney; . . ." They started to sing again and he joined in. No words, not much tune. Just singing. Just shouting. The noise grew so loud that even Sister Friske could no longer dominate it. She waved her arms and walked among the crowd, embracing them all.

It was a "great outpouring of the Spirit," she said when at last she could make herself heard. She blessed them all and finally sent them home, rejoicing. Tooney was among the last to leave. He was reluctant to go. He feared that he would lose some of this wonderful spirit, once contact with Sister Friske was broken.

"You've been born again, brother Tooney," she assured him, taking him by the hand. "You're a new man. You have nothing but love in your heart now."

"Yes, ma'am," he said. "I reckon that's right. But—I just hope I can hang onto it."

"Of course you can! Whenever you find hate creeping into your heart, get down on your knees and pray. Good night, brother Tooney. Praise the Lord! And come back tomorrow night."

It was fifteen miles to his ranch, much too far to make a daily trip to town and get anything else done. But he had to go home. He had to see Eth-

el and tell her what had happened to him. She would be happy too.

MOST of the way home he sang the songs he had learned that night and when he got there he was singing louder than ever, partly to convince Ethel he had "got religion" and partly to hang onto it. He saw the light appear in the front bedroom, and he strode up to the house, still singing.

Standing in the doorway, clutching her nightgown, with her hair hanging down about her scrawny shoulders, Ethel looked haggard and frightened. He winced at the contrast between her and the buxom, cheerful Sister Friske.

He tried to make up for this unfaithful comparison by his ardor in seizing her and kissing her. "Honey, I'm a new man!" he told her. "I've been born again!"

She screamed and fought free from him. Corbin came running from his room. He had a piece of stovewood. "Don't you hurt her: I'll—I'll—"

"Corbin!" Ethel blocked his way. "He didn't hurt me. Go on back to your room! He—he's all right."

"He's drunk," said Corbin. "I won't let him hurt you."

Tooney fought off his shock and anger. "I ain't drunk," he announced with dignity. "I've got religion."

But right then he didn't have a bit. It was all gone, knocked out of him by the sight of his 19-year-old son waving that stick of stovewood. He ought to lambast him good, that's what he ought to do. That's what he *would* do!

"Please don't fight! Don't fight!" cried Ethel.

Fight? This would be no fight. He was going to thrash his upstart son, that was all.

"Look out, ma! I'll handle him," Corbin said.

Tooney looked at his son in amazement. He saw him for the first time not just as his son, but as a full-grown man. He was a big man—tall, leathery, tough-looking. He could put up a good fight. A stirring of pride mingled with Tooney's wrath.

Suddenly, Tim appeared in the living room with a six-shooter. Tim was twelve years old. The six-shooter was a frontier forty-five. Tooney stared at his younger son in stupefaction.

"Tim!" he muttered. "Tim!"

"You let 'em alone!" Tim said.

Ethel went to him and tried to take the gun, but he pushed her easily aside.

"Aint you ashamed of yourself?" she reprimanded.

"No, I ain't!" he maintained haughtily.

Corbin seized him and wrenched the gun from his hand. "You little wart! You don't know what you're doin'."

Tooney surveyed his family sadly. "And tonight I got religion!' he said bitterly.

Ethel turned to Corbin. "Start the fire. Put on the coffee pot."

"No! No!" Tooney shouted, "I ain't drunk! I tell you I got religion!"

They watched him warily.

"But I ain't got it now. It's all gone—all gone—" He sat down and put his head in his hands. Ethel approached timidly. She stood over him, discreetly sniffing.

"All right! Smell of me if you want to. I was drinkin' before I went to the meetin'. Maybe I still smell like liquor. But I ain't drunk. I was just happy. That's why I was singin'."

"Meetin'?" Ethel repeated suspiciously. "What kind of a meetin'?"

"A church-house meetin'. Singin' and preachin' and prayin'. And how she could sing and preach and pray!"

"She?" The one word tinkled like a falling icicle.

"Sister Friske. She's holdin' the meetin'."

"A *woman* preacher?"

"That's what she is. And she's a

humdinger too!"

"She must be. No wonder you had such a good time at the meetin'."

In a way this was worse than Corbin with his stovewood and Tim with his six-shooter. It hurt so bad because it reminded him of occasions he would have liked to forget. It ain't nothin' like that, Ethel," he said patiently. "You'll see. I'm goin' back tomorrow night. I'll take you along and let you see her."

"I'd like to see her," Ethel said.

Tooney said to the boys, "Ill take you along too. Maybe it'll do you some good."

The dove of peace hovered briefly, then Ethel asked about the money. He showed her what he had left and was disturbed to find he had spent far more than he thought.

"They passed the hat at the meetin'," he said righteously. "And of course I chipped in."

STRANGELY enough, Ethel didn't seem to approve. She wanted to know why he hadn't paid the bills, and she wanted to know where the cowpunchers were. Explaining this was difficult.

"I don't need no punchers this winter, anyhow," he maintained. "I can take care of everything, me and the boys."

"Rustlers'll steal you blind," she predicted bleakly.

The next day Tooney hitched a team to the buckboard and started back to town with Ethel. The boys went along, riding their horses.

He was going to take them to the meeting and convince them that he was neither drunk nor crazy, and he was going to try very hard to get another shot of religion. Maybe the next one would last longer.

They had just crossed Sharp Rock River and were pulling along a sandy stretch of road which put the team to work. The buckboard rolled noiselessly and the noon sun poured fire down into the breezeless river bend.

Corbin and Tim were riding ahead, walking their horses along lazily, and then they were off in a run. Tooney muttered, "Blamed brats! It's too hot to run them horses that way. Through the sand too."

They disappeared over a rise, and a little later Tim came fogging back. "We jumped us a cow thief! Bet he gets away now, dadblame it! Corbin made me come back and tell you—"

He whirled his horse and started back.

"Hey!" Tooney thrust the lines into Ethel's hands. "Come back here with that horse!"

In huge disgust, Tim surrendered his horse and Tooney jumped into the saddle. With his legs drawn up awkwardly above the short stirrups, and with the horse floundering through the sand with the unaccustomed weight, Tooney didn't figure his chances of catching a cow thief very good. Nor did he have a gun.

Why was he in such a predicament? Because he was on his way to church. He had religion. He had been born again and he was a new man. But he was in the same old world—a world full of the same old cow thieves he had battled all his life. And you had to fight them the same old way.

"Why the devil didn't I bring my gun?" he muttered. "Wonder if Corbin—"

Yes, Corbin had a gun. Tooney heard the shooting before he topped the rise. It was too far away for him to participate, even if he had been armed. He saw it all from a distance of about two miles. He saw Corbin on the tail of the other rider. Both were shooting.

Helplessly, Tooney pounded down the long slope towards them. He did some frantic praying, and he put his

newly discovered religion to a severe test. He reminded God that he was on his way to church. So was Corbin. God would see to it, of course, that Corbin didn't get shot. But Tooney wanted to be sure He didn't make any mistake.

"He's a good kid," Tooney pleaded. "He came at me last night with a stick of stovewood because he thought I was drunk. You can't hold that against him. You can hold that against me. But I'm never goin' to get drunk any more—"

He broke off with a hoarse shout of dismay as Corbin's horse went down. In an instant the animal was up again, running, but Corbin lay concealed by the knee-high tufts of bunch grass that covered the wide valley ahead.

Tooney's prayers turned to curses as he raced on. He cursed the unknown assailant and swore first of all to run him down. That was more important right now than going to Corbin. If Corbin were dead, it was the only thing to do. If on the other hand Corbin were only wounded, he might be able to help him.

Should he ride the extra distance to find out? Should he take those few extra precious moments?

THE fleeing rider was headed up the valley toward Misery Mountains, and if Tooney followed him on the straightest line, he would not pass within several hundred yards of where Corbin had fallen.

"If he's dead I can't help him—if he ain't dead, maybe I can't help him anyway. What's done is done. I can't change that. But I can catch that skunk—!"

It was quite awhile before he remembered that he wasn't alone. He looked around at the buckboard which was following, the horses in a run. Ethel could see about Corbin. He got a little comfort in that thought as he settled grimly to the chase.

It was a chase that led steadily northward, up the valley to Misery Mountains—a range of low hills that sheltered a settlement of homesteaders.

"Some lousy clodhopper!" Tooney guessed. "I'll get him, if I have to clean out the whole pack!"

He remembered the time he had caught one of them on his range, stalking a bunch of cattle like a coyote looking for something it could kill. Instead of shooting him like a coyote, as he should have done, he let him off with a warning.

Tooney's weight was beginning to tell on the little horse, and he was falling behind. It was obvious that he would lose sight of the man in the hills.

"I'll track him," he swore. "I'll track him plumb to hell!"

The fact that he had no gun bothered him a little. But he told himself he didn't need a gun to handle a clodhopper. Just the same he would get one at the first house he came to—if there was one in the house. Some of these squatters didn't have a gun. They didn't have anything. They didn't seem to want anything—not if they had to work for it.

Tooney considered himself a failure in life, measured by the accomplishments of neighboring ranchers and the example set by his wife's people. But he worked hard. And each year he had a little money, if only enough to pay his bills.

And while he felt he was scorned by his more prosperous neighbors, he thoroughly despised the lowly squatters of Misery Mountains. He hated anybody who wouldn't fight, and above all he hated a thief. Anybody who wouldn't work for a living had to steal, he reasoned. These squatters didn't work, so they were thieves.

When he finally lost sight of the man he was chasing, he turned his eyes to the tracks of the running horse. He

studied them. He memorized them like printed words arranged in rhythmic pattern and used over and over again. He knew them by heart when he got to the hills, and he followed them unerringly.

The beat of them fell into music and assumed the words he had learned last night, words and music that still filled his soul, but were forgotten. "Oh, come, come, come . . . Glory, Glory, hallelujah! Glory, Glory, hallelujah . . . !"

His chase became something of a fanatical search for an evildoer, to the strain of a battle hymn. He had God on his side. Hadn't he? Bitter and sickening doubts assailed him as he thought of Corbin lying back in the valley.

It made no difference whether God was on his side or not! If God wasn't, the Devil was. And he would work with the Devil cracking down on this clodhopper.

In a rocky stretch of ground he lost the tracks and before he could find them again he caught a glimpse of the rider going over a brush-grown ridge. Keeping his eyes on the spot, he again picked up the track when he got there.

He passed a shack at the side of a small muddy lake, and did not stop for it looked deserted. There was another one across the lake and he could see some people there. A horse and buggy stood in the shade of a large sycamore tree nearby and a kid carrying a fishing pole was running away from the water.

Tooney kept to his trail, which turned at the end of the lake and swung back toward the shack. Was this where the man lived, or had he just taken refuge there? A pack of dogs ran out barking and then turned tail and scattered.

There was no one in sight when Tooney reached the house. It was a miserable little box made of scrap lumber, with cloth and paper windows. There seemed to be no front door, or if there was it had swung inward and couldn't be seen.

That door looked not inviting, but very threatening in the sudden stillness Tooney swung from his saddle and strode toward the door with all the contempt due the kind of people who lived here—the kind who would steal and run and hide. But they were also the kind who would shoot when cornered. The man who had shot his son was here.

Tooney realized clearly what he was doing. He was walking unarmed upon a hidden killer. But he felt no hesitancy, no fear. This man might shoot him. But he had been shot before. One time he had taken four bullets, and had gone on to get the man who was trying to kill him. He wasn't easy to kill. He was mighty hard to kill. And now that he was this close, nothing could stop him. Nothing!

BUT something did. A vision perhaps, a mental picture that had appeared to him again and again since the night before. A woman. A large resplendent woman, white-robed angelic in spite of her size.

Yes, a vision, a picture, a reminder of the wonderful thing that had happened to him last night. He guessed that God was on his side, after all.

The "vision" said, in bell-ringing tones, "Brother Tooney!"

Brother Tooney stopped. He stared at Sister Friske, remembering how she had suddenly appeared before him the first time, there in the saloon. Perhaps she didn't walk around like other people. Perhaps she appeared and disappeared, the way angels were supposed to do.

He glanced about to make sure he was still in the forlorn depths of Misery Mountains, and he saw again the horse and bugy beneath the tree. This,

then, was a more plausible means of transportation, particularly for a very large angel without wings.

"You—Sister Friske — here?" he stammered.

"Lord bless you, brother Tooney, I go everywhere. Wherever there are lost souls, whever there is distress and need, there's where you'll find me."

Even the astonishing apperance of Sister Friske couldn't distract Tooney for long. "I'm after the low-down skunk that shot my boy!" he said.

Sister Friske said in gracious but firm disapproval, "There are no skunks in this house, brother Tooney."

"Where'd he go?"

"Who?"

"That—man I was chasin'."

"Why, he's right here," said Sister Friske, quite calmly.

"Oh, he is huh!" Tooney stood face to face with her, and she filled the doorway. "Stand aside, ma'am!"

She lifted her hand solemnly. "Vengeance is mine, thus sayeth the Lord!"

"Huh?"

"Have you ever read the Bible, Brother Tooney?"

Tooney backed up a step. "Well—no. I just got religion last night, you know. Couldn't read it all in one night."

"Have you got a Bible, brother Tooeny?"

"Well—not yet."

"I'll give you one. In the meantime, you can take my word for it. 'Vengeance is mine, thus sayeth the Lord.' That, brother Tooney, is the Scripture."

"I don't care what the Bible says! He shot my boy. I'm goin' after him!" He made a move to shove her aside, but found he couldn't touch that gleaming white robe.

"The Devil's got hold of you, brother Tooney!"

"That suits me. Just so I get hold of that skunk in the house."

"Wait! If it hadn't been for me, that 'skunk' would have shot you when you rode up."

This was something he could believe. "But he couldn't have stopped me! Nothin' can stop me now—not even you—"

"Not even the Lord?"

"The Lord wouldn't stop me. The Lord knows he shot my boy, and now —"

"Who is that coming?" she asked.

Tooney looked back the way he had come, for the first time since he had started the chase. His first thought that Sister Friske had created some Biblical miracle, and he couldn't believe the approaching rider was Corbin, till his son circled the lake and headed directly for the house.

"Corbin!" he shouted. "It's Corbin!"

"Your son?" asked Sister Friske. "The one you thought was shot?"

"He ain't hurt! He ain't hurt bad, anyway. He's like his old man. You can't down us Tooneys! No low-down, clod-hoppin—"

He stifled his outburst as his eyes met Sister Friske's, but his exultation wasn't stifled. He shouldn't brag and cuss like this in front of her, maybe, but it was just the way he felt about it.

"I am very happy to know that you were mistaken," Sister Friske said. "Praise the Lord!"

Corbin pulled his horse to a sliding stop and stared at the woman preacher. Tooney looked for some sign of injury on him but found none. "You—you ain't hit?" he asked.

CORBIN shook his head. "Horse just took a tumble. Knocked me out for awhile." He seemed still dazed. "I—I thought you'd caught him."

"He's in the house."

"You got him?"

Tooney shook his head. "Not yet."

"What are you waitin' on?"

Tooney's fury was gone now, and much of his desire for vengeance. "This here," he said, "is Sister Friske."

She gave Corbin a warm smile. "God bless you, my boy. I'm so glad you're not hurt."

Corbin stared at her, unblinking. "Who's she?"

"She's the preacher," Tooney explained.

"What's she doin' here?"

She answered for herself. "I'm spreading the Gospel."

For a moment Corbin was silent. Then he said, "Reckon you better spread it somewhere else. We got business here."

She was still smiling, still radiant and assured. "You're a fine looking young man—a chip off the old block, aren't you?"

This made Tooney feel proud, but Corbin showed no sign of appreciation. "Lady," he asked, frowning, "do you live here?"

"Oh, no. I'm out calling, inviting everybody to our revival services. You must come."

"Who lives here?" Corbin asked curtly.

"Bill and Gracey Knop, and their daughter Cleo."

"Friends of yours, huh?"

"Everybody is a friend of mine."

"Cow thieves too?"

Tooney chuckled appreciatively. This was his son. A chip off the old block. Talking right up to her. Talking straight, thinking straight.

Sister Friske nodded blandly. "Cow thieves too. They have souls, and my business is saving souls."

"You can have his soul, lady, but his hide belongs to us."

"Oh, no it doesn't, young man. You cannot punish this man. If he has done wrong, only God can punish him."

"That's what you think," said Corbin. He got off his horse, stepped up to Sister Friske and pulled her out of the doorway.

He found himself facing a girl. She had probably been standing behind Sister Friske all along, trying to see, but unseen. Two or three girls her size could have stood behind Sister Friske without being seen.

Not only was her size and appearance in strange contrast to that of the woman preacher, but also her mood. She was barefooted, and her knee-high dress revealed short, boy-like legs. Her face was sharp and pale, and her black eyes were blazing like those of a trapped badger.

"You get out of here!" she said.

Corbin paid little attention to her. He was looking past her at a man who stood against the far wall—a tall man with a pair of eyes that matched the girl's exactly except for size. They were smaller, little more than black dots beneath a wide ledge of a forehead. Near him stood a woman whose bony features showed only dull, bewildered terror.

Tooney stepped up beside Corbin, and for a moment there was standstill silence, six people not moving or making a sound. It was as if they had been thrown violently together into this box, never having seen one another before, and were waiting for another reshuffle.

"Help them, oh Lord! They know not what they are doing!"

Sister Friske's voice rang through the silence powerfully and with a calming effect.

"I know what *I*'m doin'," muttered Corbin. He swept the girl aside with his left hand. "Come out of there, you cow thief!"

The girl leaped at him and when he tried to push her away again, she seized his hand and buried her teeth in it. Corbin yelped and tried to throw her off.

Tooney was watching the clodhopper and sensed his first move as he whipped out a gun. Tooney was across the

room, diving into him, when the gun exploded. He crushed the man into the flimsy wall and there was a splintering of boards as they went down. Tooney seized his foe and beat his head against the floor. Then he wrenched the gun from unresisting fingers.

Corbin was still struggling with the girl. The woman hadn't moved. Sister Friske stood looking on in sad, majestic calm.

FOR the first time in his life, Tooney felt like apologizing for knocking a man down and taking a gun away from him. "I had to do it," he defended himself. "He was goin' to shoot." He was annoyed with himself for making excuses, and added, "The clop-hoppin' cow thief!"

"God pity you, brother Tooney," said Sister Friske.

"God pity *him*—when I get through with him!"

But she still seemed to pity Tooney. "What are you going to do now?"

"I'm goin' to kill him. That's all you can do with a cow thief."

"He ain't a cow thief!" The girl stopped chewing Corbin's hand long enough to express this opinion in no uncertain terms. Corbin got away from her, and she advanced on Tooney.

"Whoa! Wait a minute, sister. You seem to want in on this fight mighty bad."

"Not as bad as you do! Not bad enough to go bustin' into people's houses, accusin' people of doin' somethin' they didn't do!"

There had been no doubt in Tooney's mind about the guilt of this man, and wasn't yet. "He's your paw, huh? Well, natural, you'd feel that way about it." He looked at the culprit. Why in hell don't *you* say somethin', man?"

So far, the fellow hadn't spoken. He was crouching on the floor, now, on hands and knees. His hair had dropped down over his face, meeting on one side his curly thick beard, so that he looked hairy all over and more like an animal than something human.

"What do you want me to say?" he snarled.

To Tooney it was a confession of guilt and required no further questioning. "You aint' got nothin' to say, have you? You was tryin' to steal my cattle and got caught."

"You got to prove that!"

"Why have I got to prove it?"

"That's the law. You got to prove it."

"Listen, Knothead! Or whatever our name is. I ain't no lawyer. I'm a cowman. When I catch anybody stealin' my cattle, I don't take 'em to court. I take 'em to the nearest tree."

"Yeh," he jeered. "You're a big cowman, ain't you? You're judge and jury and God and everything. But you ain't goin' to hang nobody this time. You ain't goin' to scare nobody."

His black-dot eyes stabbed at Sister Friske. It was obvious that he was counting on her to save him. Tooney resented her presence, but he couldn't forget it for a single instant. Her silence was in some ways more eloquent than her words. Without saying a thing, she seemed to be in complete control, watching with saintly pity.

The mysterious power which Tooney had felt in her from the first was never so strong as now; it was the power of compassion, and Tooney didn't understand it, for he had never encountered it before.

The arrival of Ethel and Tim further prevented a summary execution of justice on the spot. They drove up in the buckboard, and the gathering became a family affair, still hostile, but less violent than it had begun.

The bare-footed girl remained as violent as anybody. She was still ready to fight all comers. Her name was Cleo. Her mother kept saying, "Sh-h-h, Cleo! Sh-h-h!" Then the old lady would say, "We're just pore folks that

minds our own business. We ain't done nothin' to you-all. Bill didn't do nothin'."

Her voice was whining, her manner cringing. Bill Knop remained insolent and crafty. Sister Friske spread her wings over them both and pleaded for mercy and understanding. "If this man has done any wrong, he will repent."

Bill Knop looked as repentent as a skunk that has just released its scent. He had all the offensive qualities that Tooney hated in a man—shiftlessness, dishonesty, and cowardice. His shiftlessness was in evidence everywhere about the miserable little shack. His dishonesty had been proved. His cowardice showed in the way he let the women folks front for him.

"All right," said Tooney. "Let him repent in jail. He wants us to prove something, and we will."

He prodded Knop through the door and made him get on Tim's horse. Tooney kept the bridle reins and climbed into the buckboard along with Ethel and Tim.

"You keep an eye on him," he told Corbin.

As he led the procession around the lake, he looked back and saw Sister Friske following in her buggy, bringing the girl and the old lady.

"Wish she'd keep her blame nose out of this," he muttered. "It ain't none of her business."

"That kind of woman thinks everything is her business," said Ethel.

"She sure is purty, ain't she?" said Tim, admiringly.

Tooney was silent.

"Your father thinks so," Ethel replied.

TOONEY groaned. "Ain't I got trouble enough, without you thinkin' up things like that? Why, she's a *preacher!*"

"A woman preacher," Ethel amended. "She's a woman, first of all. What right's a woman got bein' a preacher, anyhow?"

"Reckon a woman's got as much right bein' a preacher as a man. She's a good one. You'll see that tonight."

"If she's so good, why don't you do what she wants you to—turn this 'poor soul' loose?"

This was troubling Tooney some, but he wouldn't admit it. He had embraced Sister Friske's religion, but this was a phase of it he couldn't accept. It was all right to love your fellow men, as she said, and he could even agree to forgive those who had wronged him. All except cow thieves. They were not his fellow men.

"She's a right good preacher," he said. "But she don't know much about the cow business."

Sister Friske made no further effort to interfere. She stayed well behind all the way to town and did not follow them to the jail, but stopped instead at the camp grounds.

Sheriff Oxton was playing a game of checkers with his deputy, Ted Greenbrier. Sheriff Oxton was a good checker player, and he hired only deputies who were good checker players. If there was anything that annoyed the sheriff it was being interrupted while he was playing checkers, and since he was practically always playing checkers, he was frequently annoyed.

"All right, all right," he said without looking up. "What is it?"

"Here's a cow thief for you," said Tooney.

The sheriff continued his study of the board. "Cow thief? Hm-m-m-m."

Tooney stepped forward and swept the board and checkers from the desk. "If you spent your time doin' what you was hired to do, we wouldn't have so many cow thieves."

"What? What!" The sheriff struggled to his feet. "Oh! Sam Tooney! Drunk again, huh? I'll throw you in

the calaboose—"

"Try throwin' this buzoo in first, just to get in practice."

The sheriff stared at Knop. "Who's he? What's he done?"

"We caught him tryin' to run off a bunch of our stuff. Bill Knop's his name. He lives up in Misery Mountains."

"Oh! Misery Mountains. He ought to be in jail. Come on, you! Take him, Ted. Lock him up. What you say he done?" He surveyed the scattered checkers. "Damn you, Sam Tooney! I ought to throw you in for that. Hey! Where you goin?"

"Church," said Tooney.

Practically everybody was at the camp meeting that night, except the sheriff and his checker-playing deputy. And, of course, Bill Knop.

Knop's wife was there, and his daughter, Cleo. They were decked out in new dresses, and the girl had a red ribbon in her hair. She wore shoes and stockings. She looked grown up, and pretty, and proud. Nobody just looking at her for the first time would think she had come from Misery Mountains, that the clothes she wore were a gift from Sister Friske, and that her father was in jail.

That was the reason she *had* to look proud, of course. She was filled with that most uncompromising pride of all —the pride that conceals a secret shame. It was the pride of a person who has nothing to be proud of and who fiercely faces the world with the hollow boast: I'm as good as you are! I'm as good as anybody!

She had come to the meeting because Sister Friske had insisted. "There's no use to go to see your father right now," Sister Friske had told her. "There's no use to talk to the sheriff or to the Tooneys. You and your ma come along to church. Pray. Praise the Lord. Ask His help and He will find a way."

Cleo hadn't prayed, or praised the Lord, or asked His help. She sat, straight and unmoving, upon a plank that sagged with the weight of closely packed, sweating bodies. She stared in fierce defiance at those around her, and particularly at the backs of the Tooney's heads.

The Tooneys sat down front, all pious and proper and smug. How she hated them! Not only for what they had done to her, but what they were: Valley folks, with land and cattle of their own, with big houses and barns and horses, with men to work for them, with their guns and their high-heeled boots and their bright neckerchiefs.

MAYBE her father *had* stolen from them. And if he had, she didn't blame him a bit! They had everything, her father had nothing. It had always been that way. There were people who lived in the valleys, and there were people who lived in the hills. She had always lived in the hills—not the same hills, but always wandering through them, always looking for a valley. But the valleys were all full—full of people like these. How she hated them!

Sister Friske was preaching.

". . . . It is love, my friends, that rules the world—not hate! Love conquers all. Praise the Lord! His name is love . . ."

Cleo clenched her hands upon her knees, holding to herself, holding to her passion and her despair. There was no love in her world. Love might rule the valleys, but not the hills. In the hills there was only a constant struggle to keep alive. There was no time for love, no opportunity—

Her eyes were fixed on the back of Corbin's head, which began slowly to turn. She was unable to turn her eyes away. She knew he was looking for her, for he had glanced her way several times, and there had been a kind of wonder in his look. She knew what the wonder was: He was impressed with

her new dress, and he was wondering how she could have changed so much in such a short time. She hadn't really changed at all, not inside. She hated him as intensely as ever.

She met his puzzled stare with unblinking scorn. Surely he was not fool enough to think she would have anything to do with him, after what he had done to her! It was an insult, just looking at her that way.

". . . There is only one way you can be happy, my friends, and that is to admit love into your hearts. Let it banish *all* hates—"

Cleo's heart was pounding furiously, beating off these words. Not love itself, of course. She wasn't remotely threatened with love. But she must not let even this foolish idea take hold.

She could see that Sister Friske's heart was full of love. She went about the country trying to help other people, and she was a wonderful woman. But she didn't know the utter impossibility of what she preached.

". . . Love your enemies, and you will have no enemies. You will have no hatreds, no fears . . ."

Imagine that! Love your enemies! Imagine loving the Tooneys—that brazen, hard-faced thing who was staring at her! If he didn't stop it, she would get up and leave. No, she couldn't do that. She would stare him down.

He began to smile. She was furious. Her face burned and her eyes, locked with his, began to ache. She couldn't stand it any longer and she moved so that the woman in front of her cut off the sight of him.

Sister Friske sat down at the little organ, struck a resounding chord and called for everybody to sing. Everybody sang. Everybody but Cleo. Even her mother was singing. She had never heard her mother sing before. Her voice was thin and wavering, but the whining weariness was all gone from it.

Her mother was singing, and her father was in jail!

And that despicable cowboy was trying to flirt with her! It was awful. Unbearable. She pushed her way out into the aisle. She was swept along with a stream of people coming down the aisle. They were singing and shouting. They were crazy.

"Glory, Glory, hallelujah! Glory, Glory, hallelujah! . . ."

Sister Friske's triumphant voice soared out and enveloped her, and then she came down the aisle and embraced her. "God bless you, my child!" She turned to the others who swarmed about her. "Down on your knees, everyone! Ask God to forgive your sins!"

Cleo couldn't get away. She found herself kneeling, and she found herself crying. This helped. Either the kneeling or the crying or the singing or the blessing of Sister Friske. The suffocating fury was gone, the terrible tension. She was glad to stay there a little while and forget her troubles.

THERE was no getting away now, even if she wanted to. The whole crowd was moving down front, with handshakes and hugs and congratulations.

She saw Corbin coming toward her and she tried desperately to think of something sufficiently demolishing to say to him. But she found that she couldn't say a word. He took her by the hand.

"It's all right," he said. "Everything's goin' to be all right now."

She summoned all her fury, but there wasn't much left. "What—what do you mean?" she laughed at him. "Comin' up here, talkin' to me—"

"I've got to talk to you!" He held her with a firm hand. "I'm sorry about what happened today—"

"You're sorry! What good is that to be sorry?"

"A lot of good. My old man is sorry

too. He's goin' to call the whole thing off."

"W-what? What do you mean?"

"He's not goin' to file charges. He's goin' down and get your old man out right away. He promised me he would."

Farther back in the crowd, Sam Tooney was shaking hands with everybody—with people he had known but hadn't spoken to for years, with people he had never seen before. There was Clyde Stephens, the banker, and Old Man Dowling, the hardware man, who had made no secret of his contempt for Tooney. Now they were shaking hands and saying, "Praise the Lord, brother Tooney!" Praise the Lord, brother Dowling!"

Tooney spied Mike Matlaf and Bangs and Andy Drake. He sought them out and pumped their hands and told them that their jobs were waiting for them any time they wanted to come back. He begged them to forgive him. They said they were not holding anything against him, and didn't want to work for anybody else. He loved them as he loved his own sons. He loved everybody.

He had a bad moment when he saw Corbin holding hands with Cleo, and he remembered the promise he had made about releasing Bill Knop. Wasn't this going a little too far?

Sure, he loved everybody. But, after all, Bill Knop was a Misery Mountain cow thief. And this was Bill Knop's daughter that his son was holding hands with.

"Praise the Lord, brother Tooney!"

He accepted the outstretched hand absently. "Praise the Lord, brother Parker!"

Handshaking his way up the aisle, he passed out into the starry night. Throughout the camp grounds, covered wagons and tents attested to the distance which worshippers had come, and to their intention of staying till the protracted meeting was over. A baby's cry came from one of the wagons, a horse pawed an empty feed box, a girl giggled and there was the sound of running feet along the bank of the creek.

These sounds and sights were but shadowy suggestions of realities, things that remained outside the lighted tent, untouched by its heavenly rejoicing. Monstrous shadows moved against the canvas, giant figures weaving and struggling as if to free themselves from the furor there. The smell of horses, the cold touch of an iron-rimmed wheel, the shiver of an aspen tree in the cool night—these things all brought Tooney back to earth.

"Can I turn a cow thief loose?" he asked himself.

All of Sister Friske's exhortations about "loving thy enemies" and "turning the other cheek" marched before him. And in the distance he could hear her ringing voice.

"She's right!" he muttered. "A man ain't really saved till he can love his enemies. He can't be plumb happy till he loves everybody—even cow thieves and squatters."

He walked up the road toward town. "I'll do it now!"

Sheriff Oxton was engaged in lonely vigil with his checkerboard. Alone in his office, he sat and stared at the three black checkers and two red ones.

"Yeh? What is it? Oh, it's you, Tooney. Well—h-m-m-m."

"I want you to turn that cow thief loose, sheriff."

The sheriff studied him as if he were a problem in checkers. "Huh? Come again."

"Turn him loose," Tooney repeated.

"Why?"

It had been hard enough for Tooney to reach this decision. It was harder still to try to explain. "I just decided to let him go."

"*You* decided to let him go! Are you the law?"

Tooney was nettled. "I put him in

jail, didn't I? Reckon I can turn him loose if I want to."

"And I reckon you can't. Not if he's a cow thief. That wouldn't be fair to the law-abidin' citizens of this county—particular them that has cattle he might steal."

OPPOSITION only confirmed Tooney in his determination to shower mercy upon his enemy. "He won't steal any more cattle," he said solemnly. "I promise you that."

"How do you know?"

"Because he will be ashamed to, once his sins are forgiven."

The sheriff snorted. "What's come over you, Tooney? Damme, I believe you *have* been to church."

"And I've been saved, sheriff. Praise the Lord! And turn that cow thief loose!"

The sheriff shook his head in bewilderment. "You're loco!"

"I know that's the way it looks to you. But wait till you get religion, sheriff. You'll see. You'll love everybody. You'll want to help everybody—instead of sendin' them to the penitentiary."

The sheriff stacked up his checkers and put the board in his desk. "I reckon I've looked at that thing too long. My head is hurtin'. I'm hearin' things—" He looked up at Tooney again. "I'm seein' things!"

"You can't hold him unless I sign the charges," Tooney said. "You can't try him unless I testify against him. I won't. You might as well turn him loose."

Without another word the sheriff got to his feet and led the way down the jail corridor, between a row of empty cells. The last one he unlocked.

Bill Knop, sprawled on the cot, didn't move.

"Come out of there!" growled the sheriff.

"What for?" Knop asked insolently.

"You're free."

Knop sat up, glared suspiciously at Tooney. "Yeah? What kind of game is this?"

Tooney smiled down at him benignly. "No game at all, my friend. You're free. Your sins is forgiven. Go and sin no more." He was filled with the supreme satisfaction of forgiving his enemy. He felt like a god. He was full of compassion and wisdom and pity.

Knop's little black eyes glittered malevolently. "You're talkin' like a danged preacher!"

"Praise the Lord!" said Tooney. Briefly he considered the possibility of becoming a preacher, touring the country perhaps with Sister Friske, saving souls.

"You ain't no preacher!" Knop said. "You're a schemin' snake! You're up to somethin'!"

This was quite a shock to a brand new convert who had been in the habit of smashing a man's head for far less uncomplimentary language than this. Tooney took an involuntary step forward, hands clenched. Then he smiled. It was rather a grim smile, with clenched lips that prayed: "Help me, O Lord, to love this cow thief!"

The prisoner and the sheriff stared at him unbelievingly.

"He tried to steal my cattle," Tooney went on with his prayer, almost oblivious to the others. "He's a low-down, thievin' squatter, and he's got a minx-eyed girl that my boy is holdin' hands with. I've got every right to hate him, Lord, and it's goin' to take a lot of Your help to keep from bashin' his head in."

To remove himself from the temptation, he turned around and started down the corridor.

"All right, get out of there," growled the sheriff.

"I ain't goin' to do it!" The prisoner crouched in a corner. "I know what he wants. He wants to get me out

of here so he can kill me!"

The sheriff looked as though this were the first logical explanation of Tooney's queer actions. "Yeah!" he said. "Maybe so! All right. You can stay in there if you want to." He frowned. "No, I ain't got no complaint against you. And I reckon I can't feed you, if you ain't a prisoner." His face brightened. "If you want to confess, now, I could keep you till they got ready to send you to the pen—"

"I ain't got nothin' to confess!"

"Then," said the sheriff regretfully, "I reckon you'll have to get out and take your chances with Sam Tooney."

Tooney was deeply hurt. His first charitable act had been grossly misunderstood, and he was badly in need of a new inoculation of Sister Friske's divine inspiration. When he got back to the camp grounds, however, the meeting was over.

His family were waiting for him, and they too seemed suspicious.

"I told Cleo you was goin' to get her old man out of jail," Corbin said accusingly.

TOONEY answered wearily, "That's just what I've been doin'—or tryin' to. Where's Sister Friske?"

"She's gone to her tent. She took Cleo with her, and Mrs. Knop."

"Cleo? Oh—that girl. You're not —you and her—"

Corbin was getting that stubborn look. Tooney said, "Where's her tent?"

Sister Friske was frying bacon and eggs. She explained that she needed a lot of nourishment after a service of that kind. "It was a great outpouring of the Spirit—you look troubled, brother Tooney."

Tooney glanced uneasily at the black-eyed girl, who was regarding him frigidly, and at her mother, who stared at him with mournful, accusing eyes. Corbin crowded in behind him, then came Ethel and Tim.

"I am troubled, Sister Friske," he said. "I tried to follow out your preachin', about forgivin' our enemies and the like. I went down to get that cow—that jasper out of jail, and he wouldn't come out."

Cleo and Mrs. Knop said in shrill and skeptical unison, "He wouldn't come out?"

"No. He thought it was some kind of a trick. He wouldn't believe that I had forgiven him."

Sister Friske gave him a radiant, searching look. "*Have* you, brother Tooney?"

"I'm tryin' awful hard to."

"Praise the Lord! Come, my friends! We're going to the jail house."

Sheriff Oxton glared wildly at them as they filed into his office. Then he picked up his checker-board and threw it into a corner. "All right! What now? Haven't you caused enough trouble, Tooney? Who are these people? What do they want?"

"This is Sister Friske. She come to get that jasper out of jail."

The sheriff looked Sister Friske over carefully. He seemed less annoyed than before. "Sister Friske? I'm pleased to meet you, ma'am. What can I do for you?"

"You can release Mr. Knop, sheriff. I am going to take him home."

The sheriff nodded approvingly. "He's a bigger fool than I think he is if he don't go."

Still, it took all of Sister Friske's marvelous persuasive powers to coax Bill Knop out of his cell. He maintained that Tooney was going to kill him and he demanded protection from the sheriff, who, in turn, placed him under the protection of Sister Friske. She promised to take him home that night and assured him that he had nothing to fear from Tooney.

"Brother Tooney is a new man," she told him. "He only wants to help you."

"Oh he does, does he!" said Knop.

"I'll go home, but I'll tell you one thing —he better stay away from me."

He went with the sheriff to the office to get his personal possessions. His wife was happy and grateful. So was his daughter, and Corbin kept close to her, looking very much pleased about it all. Ethel seemed a little puzzled, and Tim was having the time of his life.

Tooney lagged behind the procession. He was finding it very hard to maintain the spirit of brotherly love in the face of such a rebuff. Sister Friske tried to reassure him.

"God will bless you for this, brother Tooney," she said.

"Maybe so," said Tooney dubiously, "but it didn't seem to work out very good."

"It will," she insisted. "We have taken the first step toward his redemption. We must not stop now."

"You mean—what else do I have to do?"

She pondered. "You must prove to him that you are his brother, and have only his welfare at heart. The poor man is suspicious and afraid. He thinks everybody is against him. Just think! It was only yesterday that you felt the same way, wasn't it?"

Tooney admitted this was true.

"Just put yourself in his place. Imagine that you are poverty-stricken, hungry, and your family in the direst need. You see a beautiful green valley and a herd of fine fat cattle. Wouldn't you like to have those cattle?"

Ethel was hovering near, listening to this conversation with a skeptical twist to her eyebrows, and Tooney frowned at her.

"Yeah, but I wouldn't steal 'em," he said.

"No, *you* wouldn't, but—" she suddenly beamed — "Suppose somebody *gave* you a cow or two!"

"Well—" Tooney was uncertain. "Nobody ever did."

"Of course not; that's just the point. If somebody had been generous with you in your moment of great need, it might have changed your entire life!"

ETHEL spoke. "I get it. You want him to give this Bill Knop a couple of cows."

"I think it would be a magnificent thing to do," said Sister Friske. "It will give this poor family a start. It will prove to them that you are trying to help them. It will be a great boon to them and it will bring God's blessing to you, brother Tooney."

To Tooney, a couple of cows didn't amount to anything. If he could do so much with so little, he was in favor of it. He shook Sister Friske's hand warmly. "I'll take 'em over in the mornin'," he promised.

The next day, with his heart filled with brotherly love, Tooney cut out a white-faced cow and her calf and a yearling heifer, and headed them for Misery Mountains. Corbin went along.

"You're liable to get in trouble," Ethel had warned. "He told you to stay away from there."

Tooney was not a man to let such a warning frighten him. In the old days, it would have been the same as issuing him an invitation. And now that he was a changed man, he was much more determined to do a good deed than he had ever been to do a bad one.

He didn't expect any trouble with Knop, however. Why should there be? He was giving the man a good cow and calf and a heifer. *Giving* them to him.

He reflected ruefully that a great many people would consider him crazy. It was probably the first time that anything like this had ever happened, and he wouldn't have believed, day before yesterday, that it could happen: A cowman giving a rustler some of the cattle he tried to steal.

It pleased Tooney immensely to think that he was doing something that no cowman had ever done before. He was

making history. This might be the beginning of a new era—the end of all wars between cattlemen and rustlers. He tried to imagine other cowmen following his lead—catching a rustler and instead of stringing him up or turning him over to the sheriff, giving him a few cows to start a herd of his own. Any comman could afford to do it, if it worked.

Anyway, it was a noble experiment. And Tooney fairly oozed nobility and good will.

When he thought of Corbin, however, he was still troubled. Corbin and this girl. This was something not covered by brotherly love, and he hated mighty bad to see his son chasing after the daughter of a cow thief. Just what he could do about it, he didn't know. He didn't have much influence over his son, any more.

When he reached the little lake in the hills, he let the cattle rest and drink. He saw the Knops watching from their cabin, and he chuckled to think what a surprise he had in store for them.

"Maybe I better go around and tell 'em," Corbin suggested.

"Oh, no! We'll just drive the stuff right around there."

Tooney's pleased anticipation clouded over a bit when Knop appeared in front of his hut with a rifle.

"Where do you think you're goin'?" he called.

Tooney was assailed by his old dislike of the man, but thrust it aside with stern and holy purpose. He didn't reply to the challenge at once, and Knop raised his rifle. "Stop where you're at!"

Tooney laughed. "My friend, I'm bringin' you a peace offering."

"A—what?"

"Here's a cow you can milk and her calf, and a heifer that'll bring you a calf next spring. Take 'em. They're yours."

"Wha'do you mean, they're mine?"

"I'm givin' them to you."

Knop squinted suspiciously. "Why?"

Tooney was having a time with his temper again. "Just because I want to do somethin' for you. We're neighbors. We're friends."

"The devil we are!"

Cleo came running. "Now, dad! He's tryin' to be friends!"

As she came up behind him, he struck back with his left hand without looking and slapped her. Corbin jumped from his horse.

"Take them cattle and get out of here!" Knop said. "I know what you're tryin' to do. You didn't have no evidence against me and you turned me loose. If I take these cattle, you'll send the sheriff out here to arrest me for stealin' 'em!"

"Why, you loco old knothead!" roared Tooney. "I ought to bash—"

"Get back!" Knop yelled at Corbin, who was walking toward Cleo.

CORBIN didn't pause, and Knop lifted his rifle. Cleo snatched at the gun as it went off.

Tooney was spurring his horse forward. He was barely aware of the fact that the rifle bullet had bored through his right shoulder till he found that the reins were slipping through his fingers and he had no control over the animal. It went plunging on past Knop, who swung, firing at him again.

This time Tooney knew when the slug hit him, right between the shoulder blades. It felt like a blunt, stabbing finger. It pushed him forward and he fell upon the neck of the running horse. He grabbed with both arms to hold on, but his right arm was useless and he rolled to the ground.

Hoofs stabbed all around him and he lay still till the horse got away, then he reached for his gun with his left hand. It was a struggle, getting the gun. It seemed that he was pinned to the ground, but it took more than a bullet

in the back and another through the shoulder to hold him down. He still had one good arm and two good legs.

And he was mad. He had never been as mad as he was right now. He had never felt so completely justified in shooting a man's head off.

He sometimes wore two guns, though he had but one now, and he could shoot equally well with either hand. Once he had hold of the gun and had got back on his feet, he knew he would not go down again till he had poured a gun-full of lead into that back-shooting clodhopper.

He stumbled toward him, firing at each step. One, two—

The man was running, yelling.

—Three, four—

The clodhopper went down with a fanatical gobble.

—Five.

That was all. Tooney weaved above his victim. The fellow was not dead yet, but surely dying. He was giving off strangled noises, turning on his face, and biting into the ground like a mad dog.

Tooney could stand no longer. He meant merely to lie down and rest awhile. He rested quite a long while, it seemed. When he woke up he was home.

There were several people in the room, but at first he was clearly aware of only one—Sister Friske. She stood at the foot of his bed, white-robed and divinely beautiful, like an angel—a well-fed, important angel. She looked very sad.

"I couldn't help it," Tooney muttered. "He—started the shootin'."

"I know," she said gently. "Perhaps God will forgive you. I will pray for you."

She knelt beside the bed, and Tooney closed his eyes. He prayed, too, but silently. He was afraid his prayers would not amount to much, compared to Sister Friske's. If anybody could win divine forgiveness for him, she could.

He listened to her prayer and began to feel wretched. She didn't spare him. She said he had committed a terrible sin. He had taken a human life. But he had been provoked to righteous indignation, he had been assailed and his life threatened.

"He is a new convert, not yet strong in the faith," Sister Friske interceded in solemn, measured tones. "But if it is Thy will to show him mercy, Oh Lord, I am sure he will make Thee a good servant."

Tooney was in the grip of a terrible anxiety. Would he be forgiven? Nothing else mattered now.

He became aware of Ethel and Tim. And there were Andy and Bangs and Mike standing in the doorway. All were subdued and apparently awed—except Ethel.

She broke in rather sharply, "He didn't commit no sin!"

Sister Friske said soberly, "He killed a man!"

"After that man had shot him twice, sure he killed him! And he had a perfect right to. I don't know much about the Bible, but I know my husband pretty well. He's rough and ready, but he ain't as bad as you make out. He never shot nobody in cold blood, and I'll bet when his time comes to step up to the Judgment Bar, he'll make out as well as the next one."

TOONEY was amazed. This was Ethel. His wife. Taking his part. Talking up for him right when he needed it terribly.

He looked at her gratefully. Ethel wasn't pretty. Not like Sister Friske. Ethel was homely, and earthy, and the best woman in the world.

"He done what you told him to," Ethel went on. "It was a crazy thing to do, takin' them cattle up there when that fellow had warned him to stay

away. There's some people you can't make friends with. They're mean all the way through."

Sister Friske countered gravely, "The Bible says, Love thine enemies. It tells us to do good for evil, and turn the other cheek."

"The other cheek nothin'!" snorted Ethel. "He was shot in the back!"

Sister Friske was full of tenderness and sympathy. "I know. I suppose there are some people in the world who repay a kindly act with a stab in the back. It's hard to understand, but true."

Tooney was feeling immensely cheered. "Then you think—I'll get forgiveness?"

Sister Friske considered briefly. "Since you are truly repentant, I believe you will be forgiven."

A sigh of relief came from the depths of Tooney's soul. He took Ethel by the hand. Somehow, she had pulled him right out of hades.

Tim stood near the bed, big-eyed and scared looking. "What's the matter, cowboy?" Tooney joked. "You ain't worried about me, are you?"

Tim was.

"You don't need to be. I been punctured a lot of times. Looks like I have to get that done every once in awhile, so the meanness can come out."

"You ain't mean," said Tim.

Tooney's heart swelled with gratitude. This was Tim. His son thought he was all right too.

"Where's Corbin?" he asked suddenly.

There was an awkward silence. Then Ethel said, "He's over there—with that girl and her ma."

Tooney looked at her searchingly and read her answer. Corbin had chosen to stay with the girl in her grief. That meant he was in love with her. He would marry her, no doubt.

But Tooney didn't feel so bad about it as he thought he would. Corbin was grown up. He had a right to marry the girl of his choice, and if this was his choice, all right.

Tooney looked around at the punchers.

"How you feelin', boss?" asked Andy.

"Fine."

"We're back on the job. We'll take care of everything."

"Fine."

Everything was fine, now. He had no pain, no worry.

He was just tired.

"Reckon you all better get out," said Ethel. "He's gettin' tired."

A fine woman. A smart woman. He closed his eyes and heard them all move quietly out of the room. All but Ethel. He was still holding her hand.

ONE MAN ANTI-RUSTLERS' LEAGUE

By MILES OVERHOLT

It looked like the law was on the side of the lead-merchants all right, and Joe Angoff vowed he'd alter this if he had to give Yampa Valley a one-man Anti-Rustlers' League himself!

THE two riders halted below the brow of a hill, and Joe Angoff dismounted and stole to the top and looked over.

He was correct—a lone rustler was down in that little valley branding a cow critter. It would be the man he suspected, too. "Sneaky" Dominick Kitti.

Joe wished mightily for his field-glasses, but had to content himself with checking on the flamboyant shirt the suspect was wearing.

"It's Sneaky, all right," the cowman told Sheriff Jeff Carter, as he mounted and led the way down the arroyo.

The rustler suspect saw them approaching, however, and stepped away from the calf he had staked out, hastily divested himself of his leather coat and dropped it over the brand he had just blotched with acid.

"Caught yuh this time!" angrily shouted Joe Angoff. But the man only eyed him without a reply.

The lawman touched spurs to his horse and spurted ahead of the cowman, skidded to a halt a few feet from the man and the calf.

"What'cha doing, Dominick?"

"What does it look like to you?"

"Look! The dang thief's coverin' up his dirty work with his coat!" cried Angoff. "Jerk it off, Jeff, an' let's see what he's doin'."

"Huh-huh!" snarled Kitti. "This happens to be my yearling, and nobody's gonna stop me from doing whatever I want with it."

His hand was on his gun butt, and the sheriff nodded.

"He's right, Joe," the lawman said then. "Unless we know absolutely that he's stealing that calf, we got no right to interfere."

"Of course he's stealin' it!" shouted Angoff. "Or what's he coverin' up the brand for?"

The lawman turned to the irate cowman and muttered:

"It looks damn suspicious, all right, but we can't jump to conclusions. He's slick. It may be he's lookin' for a chance to sue us."

Angoff was far from being satisfied with the sheriff's explanation, but followed him down the valley on the way to town.

Just as they reached a point opposite the man and downed yearling, Kitti picked up his coat and put it on, for that March wind was cold. Angoff, watching the man, gasped and shouted:

"Hey, Jeff, look now! Look at the danged thief's coat! He's blotchin' that brand with acid—and the acid burnt the brand on his leather coat. Lookit—V-walkin'-K."

The lawman looked back.

"Yeh, I see it," he agreed. "And the only way we could prove it is somebody else's calf would be to kill it and cut out the brand."

THE now thoroughly aroused Joe Angoff swore all the way to town that the law seemed to be on the side of the rustlers, and it looked as though the old-time Anti-Rustlers' League would have to be revived in Yampa Valley.

Sheriff Carter bore it all with forbearance, explaining wearily several times that Kitti had come there with a reputation for crookedness. He had twice collected damages off peace officers and enemies for false arrest. Carter only wanted to be sure.

"Kitti already has a case against yuh," the sheriff told the cowman. "You called him a thief in the presence of a witness. I'd be careful if I were you."

There was no question in the minds of practically every cowman in Yampa Valley that Kitti was a rustler. More than a thousand head of cattle had disappeared since he had come to the country and bought the old Carson ranch and had established his V-Walking-K. Which was in itself an insult to the cowme, for the brand was actually a nose with a finger at its end and with three other fingers actually waving in front of it.

"Just like he was defyin' us honest cowmen!" Abe Glines asserted.

But not a thing could be actually proved against the man who, before coming to the valley, had earned a reputation as a "slicker" and a rustler who was too clever for the cattlemen and even the law. At least twice had he by a clever lure induced an arrest and collected damages from a cattlemen's association and from the sheriff's bondsmen in the county where he operated. And there, too, everybody believed he was a cowthief.

The cowmen down south even tried to frame him into prison, but he outmaneuvered them there, too. And it was not because he was so universally hated that he left Arizona to operate in Colorado—he merely wanted to try out his prowess in a new land. They checked him a bit too close in Arizona.

Kitti, a natural-born racketeer, loved stealing. He was inordinately proud of his cleverness at outwitting his enemies, and of the number of steers he had stolen without once having been caught at it.

And Carter was right—Kitti was blotching the brand on his own calf that day Angoff accused him of thievery. He was inviting arrest and hoping the sheriff would impound the calf as an exhibit. He had been maneuvering for many days so that one or more of the cowmen would "catch him" branding a calf. Angoff had brought the sheriff along in order to cinch his belief. But the lawman refused to be baited.

And that was the beginning of a move to eliminate the suspected rustler. Angoff got a few of the more influential cowmen together the following week and shortly the Anti-Rustlers' League was riding again.

Kitti employed a crew of dark-eyed, beetle-browed riders, mostly foreigners, who did not mingle with the other punchers when they came to town. But they were real cow-rasslers.

When the Government decided to throw open a part of a forest reserve to public grazing, Kitti applied for enough acreage to feed a thousand head of stock. The rule was made that the first stockman to get a herd of "livestock bearing the brand of the owner into the park in the Spring" would be awarded the first choice of grazing land. Kitti's riders went up there during the winter and branded a herd of elk that was wintering there.

The Government agent investigated, saw the brands on the elk herd, chuckled and accepted Kitt's bid. Elk certainly were livestock!

Tricky, that was Kitti.

Several years ago before the Law paid much attention to Yampa Valley, the Anti-Rustlers' League had sent many a suspect out of the Valley, bearing the League's brand of shame—"NG." Meaning "No Good," and several other things. It was merely an arbitrary brand to denote that the man

so branded was known as a thief—a "No Good," and a fellow who would not be tolerated in the Valley.

"N. G." then, was, as Tom Stewart said, not so much a Brand of Cain, as a Brand of Gain. The suspect was always branded by the group of masked riders on the back of the neck, only the tops of the letters showing above the collar. To the uninitiated the brand would likely not be noticed. Unless a man tried to hide it by wearing his collar buttoned high; or a handkerchief draped about the neck would hide it.

MEMBERS of the League, however, and all those who had known of such brandings could very quickly spot any man who was trying to hide the "Brand of Gain," and so a suspect so marked never stayed where he knew people would be looking for that emblem of degradation.

A month or so after Sheriff Carter had refused to arrest Kitti at the behest of Joe Angoff, a compact group of masked riders quietly entered the big gateway below the V-Walking-K ranch house and quickly made their way to the bunkhouse where the sleeping punchers were apprised of the danger of making a false move. Then a half a dozen of the visitors dragged the protesting Dominick Kitti from his bachelor bed at the big house and proceeded to heat the stamp "N.G." brand in the kitchen stove.

When the leader finally agreed to listen to the voluble cattleman and rustler suspect, Kitti said:

"I know what you are here for—I've heard about the Anti-Rustlers' League and how you operate. But look at this before you go ahead with your branding."

He took a folded paper from a pocket of his vest hanging at the side of his bed. The leader read the document. Then he silently passed it along to the others. Kitti said:

"So you see, you would be violating your own law if you slap that N.G. brand on me, because it's not yours—it's my brand, duly recorded and nobody else has any right to use it 'on any animal.' Well, by God, I'm an animal. You fellers just try branding me or anybody else with that N.G. brand, and damn if I don't sue every cowman in this valley for damages."

"The hell of it is," Tom Stewart told the League members, when they went into a huddle, "that the son-of-a-gun could get away with it, too. He's got the law on his side, and he could force an expose of our membership. I guess we're licked—for this time."

So the slicker once again evaded his just deserts—and now he was bolder and more defiant than ever.

When a posse gathered by Joe Angoff trailed a herd of steers Kitti's punchers were driving down Long Canyon and caught up with them at Mangold's Crossing and demanded the right to examine the herd—and did so at the point of guns—the cowmen found no stolen stuff whatever—a hundred head of Cross L and Leaning R stuff having been hidden up a narrow gulch to await the passing of the herd. Several more gulches gave up stolen cattle so that by the time the drive had reached its destination—the Cedar Brakes down on Lost River—the herd had more than doubled. Kitti had been preparing for that drive for a month by secreting small bunches of stolen stock in the feeder gulches along Long Canyon. And always there was a rear guard and an advance rider to keep the drive foreman informed.

Through Pasquale Quillici, influential dealer in stolen cattle, this herd of Kitti's would find its way to the Indian reservation across the line in Utah. Quillici's cowhands would accept the stolen cattle at his Lost River ranch

where once again the brands would be altered. Quillici's men were all experts at brand-doctoring. And the agent at the reservation was an old friend of the cattle dealer.

So it was that Kitti, purely by his boldness and his reputation for outwitting the law as well as his enemies, got away with much crookedness. It reached a point where the Valley cowmen were afraid to make a move lest they be laughed at by the wily Kitti and his men. Not that they minded being laughed at—but when the laughing took place, the rustler always had a perfect alibi. And he continued to threaten the men with damage suits for various causes, so that he had the whole country buffaloed, including, it seemed, the sheriff.

Jeff Carter wanted to slap the offensive cow-thief in prison, but he wasn't nibbling at the man's bait until he knew he was right. And so the cowmen believed the sheriff was not trying to help them get the goods on Kitti, and Kitti was figuratively thumbing his nose at all of them.

Having outwitted them by recording the "NG" brand as soon as he had learned about the Anti-Rustlers' League, the rustler now looked about him for another way of further irritating his enemies—cattlemen, the nesters and the Law. The only friends he had at all were the men he hired and those with whom he dealt.

IT WAS really because of Pasquale Quillici that Kitti had come to Colorado. He had known the cattle dealer in Arizona and together they had hatched up the rustling scheme and the ready sale of stolen herds to the Indians. Both were clever thieves and took fewer chances than their enemies guessed. But Kitti could not refrain from baiting the cowmen. He loved to watch their chagrin, and, besides, it was all a part of his scheme. His very bold defiance actually warned the cowmen off.

Now there could be heard on all sides in town and on the range—"Who stole those steers?" That meant the hundreds of fat two-year-olds which had disappeared during the summer.

Kitti heard the query wherever he went; so did his riders, and all chuckled when they heard it. But Kitti decided to have some fun with the query.

It was then that he had a brand of two letters made into a stamp—two letters that would make four letters when he used them.

And in the early Fall more than a hundred cattle of other distinguishing characteristics or marks—features such as, say, a cow with a crumpled horn, a peculiarly spotted bull, a striped brindled steer, to name a few—appeared on the range bearing, in addition to Kitti's regular V—Walking—K, a huge brand of four letters—two words, in fact—"I DID!"

That was the bold answer to the oft-repeated query of "Who stole those steers?" Kitti's answer then was: "I DID!"

And for fear everybody would not see that derisive gesture, the rustling cowman had his men make up a small herd and shove them through town so that the brand of "I DID" would be seen by everybody. The brand, however, had not been recorded.

And nobody missed seeing it. Indeed, it was the laughing subject for several days, but nobody laughed more heartily than Kitti and his men.

But the cowmen, aided and abetted by Sheriff Jeff Carter, had, after all, the *laugh finale*—the last laugh.

About a week after the cow street parade, a United States marshal dropped quietly into town and had a talk with Sheriff Jeff Carter. Next morning the two officers rode out to the

V—Walking—K spread and placed Dominick Kitti under arrest.

It had happened after the marshal had, in poking around the blacksmith shop, dug up the letter stamps which made up the joke brand—the "I DID". gesture.

"These your irons?" the officer asked, and Kitti said they were.

"Make fine joke, eh?" the rustler-cowman grinned. He didn't know then, of course, that the marshal was going to arrest him. He did—five minutes later.

Kitti stayed in jail in town only overnight, then he was jerked out and taken to Denver, along with six of his men.

And all of the clever manipulations and machinations of Kitti and Quillici were brought out at the trial, which resulted in long prison terms in a Federal prison for Kitti, Quillici and all actively concerned.

For Sheriff Jeff Carter explained to the cowmen at a meeting of the Cattlemens' Association a short time later:

"Kitti was a slick gent. Smoothest ever to work here. He seemed to want to be suspected of stealin', and that kinda threw us off. The fact that he had won a couple of damage suits down in Arizona made him still bolder. Well, anyhow, I couldn't seem to get a dang thing on him. So all I could do was to wait till he overstepped himself."

"But, shucks, that wasn't doing anything wrong—brandin' his own cattle with that 'I Did' thing," Tom Stewart argued.

"No, that thing in itself was perfectly legitimate," Jeff grinned. "But he got to monkeying with Government affairs when he had that brand made. And having it in his possession, made a Federal criminal of him—potentially so, anyway."

"Huh? How come?" someone wondered.

"In order to make those words, 'I Did', the dang crook overstepped himself," Carter went on. "Two letters did it. He would have been O.K. if he had made a stamp of all four of those letters, but the dang thief wanted to save money, so he had only a two-letter stamp made, and was adding one to the other, but—"

"I still don't see . . . ," began Stewart. Carter grinned widely.

"When he acknowledged possession of that stamp when the marshal asked him, why, that settled it. Nobody better have in his possession only the brand the Government uses—I.D.—Indian Department!"

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933

Of Complete Western Book Magazine, published Quarterly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1945.

State of New York, } ss.
County of New York }

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Martin Goodman, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of Complete Western Book Magazine and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are:

Publisher, Newsstand Publications, Inc., 350 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y.; Editor, Robert O. Erisman, 350 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y.; Managing Editor, Martin Goodman, 350 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y.; Business Manager, Martin Goodman, 350 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.)

Newsstand Publications, Inc., 350 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y.; Martin Goodman, 350 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y.; Jean Goodman, 350 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is..... . (This information is required from daily publications only.)

MARTIN GOODMAN, Business Manager.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 10th day of September, 1945. SYLVIA FIEGEN.
[SEAL.]

(My commission expires March 30, 1947.)

BUSHWACK BOUNTY

By D. B. NEWTON

Mebbeso Danny's cowman-friend had known the brand of the bushwhacker who'd been cutting out his cattle, mebbeso that was all the kid needed to know to avenge this colddeck murder!

WALL Street was enjoying another panic that season, the worst since '73; Danny Shea's theatrical agent explained the situation to him, patiently. "Sorry as hell, kid," he'd said. "There isn't a thing I can do for you right now." But something in the young man's hungry, discouraged face, and the fit of the threadworn suit, made him add:

"I'll tell you what, though. There's still plenty of cash floating around out in the Territories, and I know of a lot of new camps the regular acts never hit. I can book you a few weeks in that country, if you want me to. You'll find it's pretty rough and uncurried, but if you can make 'em like you—"

And there being no other out for Danny, he'd agreed. The agent had a good heart buried somewhere under his professional shell; he even advanced the money for the railroad ticket. So Danny Shea headed West.

It meant unending days aboard the cars, in a coach that changed its shape with every sway it took from side to side, while the brake cord went *slap-slap* against the creaking wall. With every hour, home dropped farther and farther away behind the flat, far-reaching prairie. And then the rails ran out, and there was a big coach waiting. It had no springs. Danny spent more long hours jouncing on its hard seat, carpet bag clutched to him, a sleeping Mexican wedged on one side and a whiskey drummer gouging his sharp elbows in from the other.

And so it was that Danny Shea came to Lodgepole, and misgivings edged his first timid glance along its ugly, raw, and brawling street. Those misgivings were confirmed a little later when he first saw where he was to do his act.

DESPITE its name, the Novelty Theatre was simply the biggest dive in town, although it did boast a stage of sorts with garish drops and smoking coal-oil footlights. The big cherrywood bar and its mirrors dominated the place; in addition, there were the usual gambling tables and roulette wheels and faro layouts, and the reek of bad whiskey, of stale tobacco and sweating men.

And such men! Danny had never seen their like before. There were bull-whackers, and cowmen in off the long trails, heavy-bearded, hard-handed, sun-black of face. Any one of them would have counted for a couple of Sheas—and it was these monsters Danny was supposed to entertain; to make them like him. . . .

Up on the stage a chorus of painted girls were just finishing their act to shrill whistling and applause and the stomp of booted feet. And then Danny Shea got his cue from the piano player and came running out of the wings in his checkered suit and yellow derby. He had always thought his opening song was funny, but this time, for some reason, nobody laughed. No matter how hard he plugged it, he began to see that the act was falling dismally flat.

And out in the big room a murmur started, and grew until his voice seemed lost as he tried to make himself heard. They were turning back to their games and their liquor. Even the *chirr* of the roulette wheel was starting up again.

Grimly, Danny Shea went into his dance, cold sweat running down from under the yellow derby to streak his makeup. But they weren't even watching him. Right then, he would have stopped and walked out of the place—but he remembered how broke he was, and remembered the money he'd borrowed from the agent. . . .

Someone yelled, "Who let that ham in?" All at once other voices were shouting, "Take him away!"

And then Danny broke off as a sudden tide of boos and catcalls came swelling up at him. A beer bottle splintered against the apron. He saw the piano player in the pit motion him off with a flat jerk of a thumb.

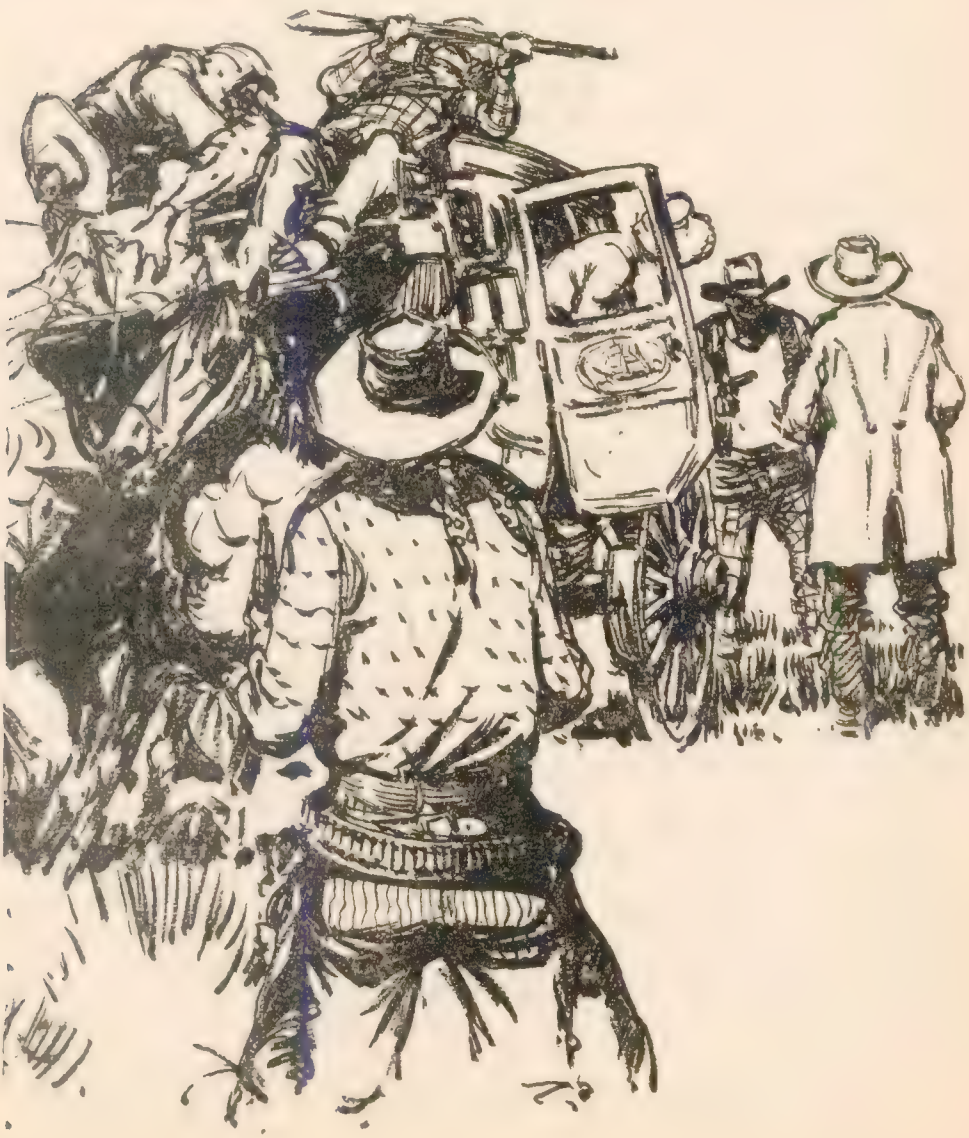
It was a killer crew stealing Bob Chalmers' cattle, all right, men who lived by the gun, men who would as soon rob a stage behind .45s as slap their own shady brand on a neighbor's maverick drive!

But he stood his ground, scared as he was. For if he retreated now, Danny knew he was beaten.

"No!" A voice boomed out across the others. "Give him a chance! Go ahead, kid! Go on with your act!"

The crowd turned to hoot at Danny's champion. Danny saw the man, dimly, part way up the stairs that led to the gallery on the Novelty's second floor. Miserably, the young man looked his gratitude for that friendly voice; but he knew the other couldn't help him. Someone who recognized the man on the stairs called out: "What the hell, Chalmers? Don't tell us you *like* that punk! C'mon, let's have the dollies again!"

Suddenly Danny remembered the juggling balls in his pocket and fumbled for them; his fingers were numb as he got them into the air and set them spinning. He was really a good juggler. Even that crowd in the Novelty quieted



a moment to watch him. Hope leaped again—

A gunshot racketed through the barn-like building, and one of the little balls shattered at the exact top of its arc. Danny's taut nerves snapped; broke rhythm and let the rest of the balls patter down around him to bounce brightly on the stage. "Whatsa matter?" came a booze-thickened shout. "Throw 'em up again, boy; I'll bust the rest of 'em for you!"

And more shots cut through the echoes of the first one, again and again. Through a raucous howl of joy from the crowd Danny cringed back, hearing the whistle of the bullets and the *thuck* they made into the canvas behind him.

Somebody screamed.

It was one of the dance hall girls, over by the stairway; she kept piling the piercing sound up and up, horribly. And as every eye turned in that direction, they saw the man called Chalmers stagger, catch himself, then slowly fold up and jack-knife across the railing to the floor. As he fell, one limp hand struck the girl and she screamed again.

For a quarter minute there was silence, then, that was worse even than the screaming. Through it Danny stared at the huddled form of the man who'd defended him; sucked in a long trembling breath between lips beaded with sweat. Then his horrified glance lifted to the gallery across the wall that faced the stage. Up there a man was running from the head of the stairs, along the dark balcony. Danny saw the large frame of him briefly, and the pale blur of his face. Caught a glimpse of white bandage; or perhaps it was a sling holding the man's left arm. A door swung open silhouetting his body momentarily before he slammed it to behind him.

ALL that Danny saw before the breathless second of silence was shattered and yelling voices broke upon the room. After that, he wasn't quite sure of anything that happened.

He felt a vague surprise on finding himself back in the cramped and dirty hole that was his dressing room. Dazed, he let himself into a rickety chair and slumped there staring without seeing, at his own tight, scared face reflected in the mirror.

Through the Novelty's thin walls sounds of confusion still boiled out of the main room, but he scarcely heard them. After a long while, it seemed, a commanding rap on the door finally brought him starting up from his chair.

Gid Ewing, filling the doorway, jerked a thumb over one shoulder. "Better get across the street," he said. "The sheriff wants you."

"The sheriff?" Danny faltered.

"Better shake a leg." The Novelty owner started to turn away, halted; eyed Danny a moment before reaching to dig a fat wallet from his pocket. "Here," he grunted shortly, peeling off a bill. "Take your stuff with you. You don't need to come back—I can't use you."

Danny took the money. No use arguing. After Ewing had gone he set to work, mechanically, packing his suitcase, taking time enough to change out of the checkered costume and wash the greasepaint from his face.

He left the Novelty by a side door, bag in hand, and went across the street to the sheriff's office. It was well after sunset, the red fire of it fading from the windows of this raw frontier town. Down at the Express office a stage was just making up for the evening run to the railroad, fifty miles away.

Sheriff Mills spun his swivel chair toward the door as Danny hesitated on the threshold. There were a couple of other men further back in the shadows of the musty office, looking at Danny, too.

The sheriff said, "Come in, kid. I won't hurt you—just want to ask a few questions."

"Yes, sir." Danny edged a few steps into the room.

Mills made a gesture that included the two men who stood behind him. "This here's Henry Gant," he said, briefly. "Brother-in-law of the man that was killed this afternoon over at the Novelty. That's Mel Bardry with him —foreman of Chalmers' Cross C spread. Naturally, they both want to hear anything you can tell us about the shootin'."

"Sure," said Danny, returning their nods. The sheriff went on bruskly:

"Everybody who was in the theatre says you was on the stage at the time, doin' your act. As I understand it, one of the boys was hoorawin' you a bit with his sixshooter and whoever shot Bob Chalmers done it under cover of the noise he was makin'. You agree?"

Danny nodded again.

"The bullet got Chalmers from the left," the white-haired sheriff continued, "and from the way he fell I'd say he'd turned and started up the steps and the killer fired from somewhere on the gallery. But I can't find anybody who was up there or even lookin' in that direction, because they was all watchin' the stage. All except maybe one."

"Meaning me?" Danny finished for him.

"Right. The gallery faces right across from the stage. But, of course," the sheriff admitted, "there was footlights glaring up right under your nose, so it would hardly be surprising if you hadn't seen anything, either. But still I thought—you know, just maybe—"

"No, I didn't see the shooting," Danny Shea admitted. But—"

The sheriff grimaced and swung his chair around again, cutting off Danny's further words. "See?" he grunted, spreading his palms. "Not a damn thing to go on. A room full of witnesses and nobody saw nothing."

Henry Gant nodded, soberly. It was so dark in the office now that Danny could barely see his face, or that of the other man—Bardry. "And the worst of it is we can't begin to think of anybody who'd even *want* to kill Bob Chalmers. He was one man everyone liked."

"Not everyone," the sheriff amended, grimly. "At least there was some dirty crook hated him bad enough to try stealin' him blind. In fact, gents, if you want my opinion I'd say the killin' goes straight to that. I think Bob Chalmers had an idea who it was had been liftin' his stock."

"No!" exclaimed Gant. "Why, he never said anything to me. How about you, Mell?"

BARDRY shook his head. "Not a word."

"His own brother-in-law and his foreman," Gant murmured. "Funny he wouldn't let us know what was in his mind."

The sheriff shrugged. "I could be wrong. But he said the other day he might be needin' my help if something he was working on proved right; I couldn't get him to talk any more about it. Today, though, when I saw him he told me he had to see someone this afternoon—and it might lead to something for me to work on. Looks to me like he'd run into a tip."

Bardry and Gant exchanged glances. The latter repeated, "All news to me. But it was kind of funny—Bob's coming into town today; and bein' in a place like the Novelty, at that. And he was actin' strange lately. I remember, just about the time the shootin' took place Mel was over at my store and we were wondering about it."

"The rustling at the Cross C had about driven him crazy, I reckon," the

sheriff said.

"But you couldn't talk him into sellin'," Gant put in. "I sure tried often enough to help him—offered him a damn good price, too. He wouldn't listen."

"Sheriff!"

The way Mills and the others looked at Danny he knew they had all completely forgotten him. He said: "I started to tell you something a minute ago, but I didn't get a chance to finish."

The sheriff let his swivel chair bang forward. "What do you mean?" he demanded. "You saw somethin'?"

"Yes. Not the actual shooting, but there was someone on the balcony—"

"Just a minute!" the sheriff interrupted. "Let's get some light in this damn place." He fumbled with a match and the lamp on his desk. "Now, kid, what are you tryin' to tell me?"

The sudden yellow wash of the lamplight was startling to eyes that had been straining, without realizing, against the fast growing darkness. Danny blinked into it. The other two men crowded close behind the sheriff's chair to hear what he was going to say.

"Well?" the officer repeated.

Danny swallowed, the words gone dead in his throat. He wasn't looking at the sheriff, but above his head at the faces of Gant and Mel Bardry. For the first time he had a good view of the Cross C foreman. And he saw now that Bardry was a large man, bulky and thick.

And that his left arm rode bandaged in a clean white sling.

Danny swallowed again.

The big man scowled suddenly, said: "What the hell you starin' at, mister? I guess a man can fall off a horse and break his arm without it bein' your business."

Quickly, then, Danny switched his glance—and in the eyes of Henry Gant, caught a glint reflected from the lamplight that he had never seen in a man's eyes before.

"I—guess I didn't really have anything to tell you," the young man managed to get out, talking to the sheriff but still staring horrified at Gant. "Nothing you could go on. It just seemed that—that I did notice someone up in the gallery this afternoon, while I was doing my act. Couldn't see him very well, though."

"Know him if you ran across him again?" the sheriff demanded.

"No. Oh, no," Danny said, quickly. "It was pretty dark."

Sheriff Mills slammed his chair back, disgusted, and stood up. "That's a lot of help!" he growled. "I may as well get back to the Novelty and start again from scratch."

"We'll go along," said Gant. His piercing eyes sought Danny's. "How about you, kid?"

Danny read a threat in that burning look. "I—I was thinking of going out on the coach this evening," he ventured. "It leaves in a few minutes. If it's all right—"

The sheriff hesitated. "Maybe you better stick around—might need you for a witness."

"He's showed he can't tell us nothin'," Gant cut in. "If he really wants to leave town, I think I'd let him go."

DANNY thought there was more in that statement than the sheriff heard—something meant for him alone. The officer merely shrugged. "Okay, then. But you'll have to hurry, kid."

"Yeah."

Danny's carpetbag was already in his hand. As he started away down the street, he glanced back and saw the three men cutting across from Mills' office toward the Novelty; he saw Bardry turn to look at him once, and the man's unbandaged right hand was down near the butt of the big six-gun on his

thigh. Danny didn't loiter.

Lights were on down at the stage station, and out in front the mules stood restless in the harness while the driver tossed up heavy mail sacks. Danny sat down on a bench just outside the station door to wait, carpetbag on his knees, as he watched the bustle of final preparations. A chill breeze had risen with the dusk, but the long tremors that shook through him weren't caused by that.

In the drifting dust that veiled the heavy coach wheels he seemed to be watching again, Chalmers stagger, crumpling lifeless. He saw a big man with a bandaged arm running in the darkness of the gallery, silhouetted before a door slammed behind him. He saw the eyes of Henry Gant with a threat burning in them.

As he sat there, too, he seemed to hear the voice of Chalmers as it had sounded, cutting through the jeering laughter of the crowd. "Give the kid a chance," he'd begged. "Give him a chance!"

Bob Chalmers had known what it meant to have the cards stacked against you. He had known, too—or suspected—enough to have killed the generosity in another man. Yet with it all he'd found it in him to give a scared young hoofer a word of friendly encouragement.

And now Bob Chalmers lay dead, with traitor's lead in him. . . .

The driver climbed to the high seat and got the reins unwrapped from around the brake handle. The mules stamped expectantly. The station agent, coming to the door, noticed Danny sitting alone on the bench. "Hey, mister!" he exclaimed. "Was you aimin' to take the stage? You better get on it." And when Danny failed to answer, the other touched him on the shoulder. "Hey, wake up! He's pullin' out!"

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Danny shook himself. He looked vaguely at the man, and at the big coach. His face seemed white and hard in the lamp by the door. "No," he said, slowly. "I guess I wasn't going anywhere."

HE GOT up and moved off into the shadows. With a flash of the whip the driver started his stage rolling; the agent stared after Danny a long moment before he shrugged and went back into his office.

The chorus at the Novelty was doing its act again when Danny slipped in through a side door, into the heat and smell of the place. From the wings he surveyed the crowd, saw Mills and Gant and Bardry at once. Gid Ewing was out front, too, an anxious look distorting his face. Apparently the theatre owner didn't like the kind of publicity he was getting today.

But the customers didn't seem to mind a murder or two in the place. They were in full swing again. They cheered lustily as the girls ended their number, and before the noise had subsided, Danny was already out on the stage.

He caught Ewing's angry scowl as the owner saw and started for him, ordering him off with a jerk of his arm. The piano player, too, was bewildered and wouldn't begin Danny's introduction. But the young man didn't seem to notice. He stood now at the very edge of the smoking footlights, and the yellow glow washing up at him brought out strangely the planes of his tight, pale face.

"Oh boy!" shouted a thick, familiar voice. "It's him again! Start throwin' up them balls, kid, and I'll plug the rest of 'em for you."

"No!" Danny cut back. "We'll do without that part of the act tonight. People sometimes get hurt." Something in his voice caught the attention of the crowd. The click of the roulette wheel died; a hush began through the room.

"I almost forgot and left town tonight without playing the evening show," Danny told them. "But there's a funny story I wanted you to hear, so I thought I'd better come back and tell it. Don't stop me if you've heard this one before, either, because I don't think you know the gag line."

He pointed to a cowhand near the stage. "I wonder if this gentleman will mind if I borrow his gun for a few minutes," he went on. "I promise to give it back in good condition, but I have to do a trick with in when I finish the story. It makes the whole thing a lot funnier."

The man hesitated, then shrugged and passed the weapon up over the footlights. Danny took it, tried to do an awkward road agent spin and ended by nearly dropping the sixshooter. The crowd laughed. That pleased Danny Shea, because it should confuse his enemies and give him time to finish what he had to do.

And then as the room quieted, he told them the story. It was all about a certain rancher who kept complaining that folks were stealing his cattle, when the real joke of it was that his own foreman had been doing it all along. The foreman didn't appear to be quite clear in the head as to just who he worked for; whether it was his boss, or a relative of the boss's who wanted the ranch himself—maybe because he was some shucks as a storekeeper and for that reason thought he could run it better.

But the rancher finally caught on, so —and gosh! this was where the whole thing really got comical—with a fake tip these two clowns lured him into a saloon where there was a lot of noise going on to cover a shooting; and then the foreman, who didn't even know you could see his bandaged arm plain as day from down on the stage—

Danny got no further. He was tak-

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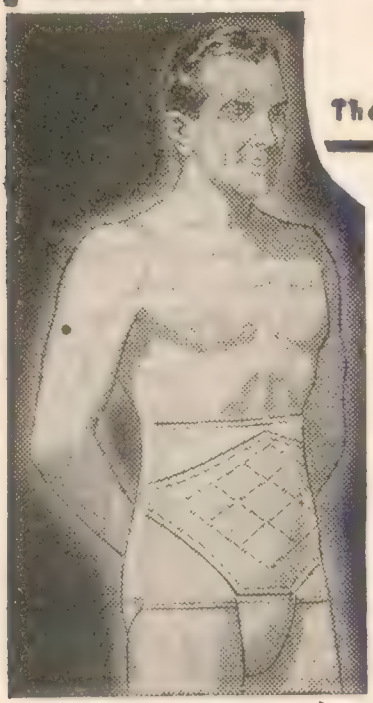

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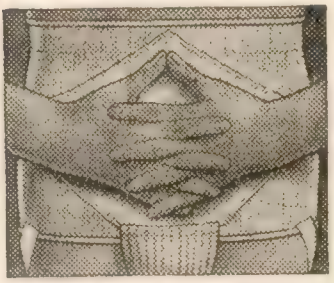

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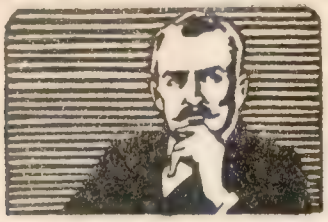

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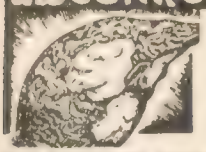

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ing a dive, suddenly; in the same breath that a gunclap split the tense silence and tunneled the air where he had stood.

Danny rolled his body into the footlight trough, where the heat of the lamps singed his flesh and the brightness blinded him. With quick slashes of the gun barrel in his hand he smashed two of the lamps, and as they guttered out and the room beyond showed clearer he braced elbows on the floor, clutched the heavy gun in both hands, and squinted down the barrel.

He got Bardry lined in the sights, lost him, got his hands steadied and saw his target just as the C Cross foreman's gun boomed fire a second time. The bullet *zinged* off a metal reflector close to Danny's head. Danny winced, steadied himself again and, aiming at the exact place where Bardry's sling showed white across his breast, squeezed trigger.

EVEN as he saw Bardry stagger, another gun spoke, and sharp pain lanced Danny's shoulder. A groan wrenched out of him; he forgot the gun, forgot danger, forgot everything but the incredible fierceness of that burning fire. More guns were booming now, piling their deafening thunder against the shouts that filled the big room. It all meant nothing in his agony.

But after the first spasm of it passed his brain cleared somewhat. He sat up shakily. He knew that the gunfire had silenced, but that the room had broken into a turmoil.

Men were scrambling onto the stage, with Gid Ewing in the lead. The Novelty owner was bending over Danny, solicitously, helping him to his feet.

"Nice going, kid!" Ewing exclaimed in admiration. "What a nerve you had to have to stand up to Mel Bardry like that. I never seen the like of it."

"What about Gant?" Danny asked

faintly.

"The sheriff got him, right after he plugged you. Looks like you called the turn, youngster! Openin' up on you like that was the same as signin' a confession, after the way you told 'em off."

"That's what I figured," Danny agreed.

He didn't tell them any more. How he'd known he couldn't make the truth he'd guessed stick, facing it out with Gant—not with those eyes of Gant's that froze him stiff with fear. But that up here on the stage—where he couldn't see those eyes—he'd had his chance to tell his story and work on Mel Bardry's nerves. And his luck had seen him through.

And now, despite the throb of his shoulder—that would soon be over—a new, warm glow swept through him. Gid Ewing, and the sheriff, and all these others who pressed about him now with eager hands, and praises on their lips—

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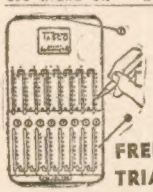

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